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Except for personal experiences, the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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Quest of the Gazolba

The bird was the last of its kind: its loss would be followed by grave disaster.

THE crown of the kings of Ustaim was fashioned from the rarest materials that could be procured anywhere. Its circlet was of gold mined from a huge meteor that fell in the isle of Cyntrom, shaking the isle with calamitous earthquake; and the gold was harder and brighter than any native gold of earth. It was set with thirteen jewels, unmatched even in fable, that starred the circlet with strange, unquiet fires and lusters dreadful as the eyes of the basilisk.

More wonderful than all else, however, was the stuffed gazolba-bird that topped the crown, gripping the circlet with its steely claws just above the wearer's brow, and towering with splendid plumage of green, violet and vermilion. Its beak was like polished brass, its eyes were like small dark garnets in silver sockets. Seven lacy blood-red quills arose from its black-dappled head; and a white tail fell down in a spreading fan like the beams of some white sun behind the circle.

The bird was the last of its kind, according to the sailors who had slain it in an almost legendary isle beyond Sotar, far to the east. For nine generations it had decked the crown of Ustaim; and the kings looked upon it as the sacred emblem of their fortunes, whose loss would be followed by grave disaster.

Euvoran, the son of Karpoom, was the crown's ninth wearer. He had worn it superbly for two years and ten months, following the death of Karpoom from a surfeit of stuffed eels and jellied salamanders' eggs. On all public occasions it had graced the brow of the young king, conferring upon him a great majesty in the eyes of the beholders. Also, it had served to conceal the sad increase of an early baldness.

In the late autumn of the third year of his reign, Euvoran rose from a breakfast including twelve courses and twelve wines. As was his custom, he went immediately to the hall of justice, whose windows looked out across the city of Aramoam toward the orient seas.

Being well fortified by his breakfast, Euvoran felt himself prepared to unravel the most tangled skeins of law and crime, and to mete swift punishment to all malefactors. Beside his throne's right arm there stood an executioner leaning on a huge mace with a leaden head. Often, with this mace, the bones of heinous offenders were broken, or their brains were spilt in the king's presence on a floor strewn with black sand. At the throne's left arm a torturer busied himself with the screws and pullies of certain fearful instruments, testing them repeatedly.

On that morning the city constables brought before Euvoran only a few petty thieves and vagrants. There were no cases of felony such as would have warranted the wielding of the mace or the use of boot and rack. The king, who had looked forward to a pleasant session, was disappointed.

"Away with these mackerel!" he roared, and his crown shook with indignation, and the tall gazolba-bird on the crown appeared to nod and bow. "They pollute my presence. Give each one a hundred strokes of the hardwood briar on the bare sole of each foot, and forget not the heels."

Before the court-officers could obey him, two belated constables entered the hall of

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

justice, haling between them a most peculiar individual with the long-handled, many-pointed hooks used in Aramoam for the apprehending of suspected criminals. Though the hooks were seemingly embedded in his flesh as well as in his filthy rags, the prisoner bounded continually aloft like a goat, and his captors were obliged to follow him in these lively and undignified saltations, so that the three presented the appearance of acrobats.

With one last flying leap in which the officers were drawn through the air like the tails of a kite, the queer personage came to a pause before Euvoran. The king regarded him in amazement and was not prepossessed by the extreme suppleness with which he bowed to the floor, causing his captors, who had not yet recovered their equilibrium, to sprawl at full length in the royal presence.

"Ha! what have we now?" said the king in an ominous voice.

"Sire, 'tis another vagabond," replied the breathless officers. "He would have passed through Aramoam in the fashion that you behold, without stopping, and without even lessening the height of his saltations, if we had not arrested him."

"Such behavior is highly suspicious," growled Euvoran. "Prisoner, declare your name, your birth and occupation, and the infamous crimes of which, beyond doubt, you are guilty."

THE captive, who was cross-eyed, appeared to include Euvoran, the mace-bearer, and the torturer and his instruments all in a single glance. His nose, ears and other features possessed unnatural mobility, and he grimaced continually, making his unclean beard toss and curl like sea-weed on a whirlpool. He was ill-favored to an extravagant degree.

"I'm a necromancer," he replied, in a tone that set Euvoran's teeth on edge like the grating of metal upon glass. "I was born in that realm where the dawn and the sunset meet, and the moon is equal in brightness to the sun."

"Ha! a necromancer!" snorted the king. "Do you not know that necromancy is a capital crime in Ustaim? We shall find means to dissuade you from such infamous practices."

At a sign from Euvoran the officers drew the captive toward the instruments of torture. To their surprise he allowed himself to be chained supinely on an iron rack. The torturer began to work the levers and the rack lengthened little by little with a surly grinding, till it seemed that the prisoner's joints would be torn apart. Inch by inch was added to his stature; yet he appeared to feel no discomfort. To the stupefaction of all present, it soon became plain that his arms, legs and body were more extensible than the rack itself: for the frame was now drawn to its limit.

All were silent, viewing a thing so monstrous. Euvoran rose from his throne and went over to the rack, as if doubting his own eyes. The prisoner said to him:

"You would do well to release me, O King Euvoran."

"Say you so?" The king cried out in a rage. "We have other ways of dealing with felons in Ustaim."

He made a sign to the executioner, who came forward quickly, raising his leaden-headed mace.

"On your own head be it," said the necromancer, and he rose instantly from the rack, breaking the bonds that held him as if they had been chains of grass. Then, towering to a dreadful height which the wrenchings of the rack had given him, he pointed his long forefinger at the king's crown. Simultaneously he uttered a foreign word that was shrill and eldritch as the crying of fowl that pass over toward unknown shores in the night.

As if in answer to that word, there was a loud, sudden flapping of wings above Euvoran's head, and the king felt that his head was strangely lightened and bare. A shadow fell upon him, and he, and all others present, saw above them in the air the stuffed gazolba-bird, which had been killed more than two hundred years before by seafaring men in a remote island. The wings of the bird, a living splendor, were outspread for flight, and it carried still in its claws the jeweled circlet of the crown.

Balancing, it hung for a little over the throne, while the king watched it in awe and consternation. Then, with a great whirring, its white tail outspread like the beams of a flying sun, it flew swiftly through the

open palace-portals and passed eastward from Aramoam into the morning light.

After it the necromancer followed with goatish leapings, and no man tried to deter him. Those who saw him swore that he went north along the ocean strand, while the bird flew seaward, as if homing to the half-fabulous isle of its nativity. The necromancer was seen no more in Ustaim. But the crew of a merchant galley, landing later in Aramoam, told how the gazolba-bird had passed over them in mid-ocean, still flying toward the uncharted coasts of dawn. And they said that the gold crown, with its thirteen unmatched gems, was still carried by the bird.

KING EUVORAN, so weirdly bereft, with his baldness rudely bared to the gaze of thieves and vagrants, was as one on whom the gods have sent down a sudden bolt. It seemed to him that his royalty had flown with that crown which was the emblem of his fathers. Moreover the thing was against nature, annulling all laws: since never before, in history or fable, had a dead bird taken flight from the kingdom of Ustaim.

Indeed, the loss was a dire calamity. Donning a voluminous turban of purple silk, Euvoran held council with his ministers regarding the state dilemma that had thus arisen. The ministers were no less troubled and perplexed than Euvoran, since neither the bird nor the circlet could be replaced. In the meanwhile this irreparable misfortune was rumored throughout Ustaim. The land became filled with doubt and confusion, and some of the people murmured against Euvoran, saying that no man could be their rightful ruler without the gazolba-crown.

Then, as was the custom of the kings in any national crisis, Euvoran went to the temple in which dwelt the god Geol, the chief deity of Ustaim. Alone, with bare head and unshod feet, as was ordained by priestly law, he entered the dim adytum. Here the image of Geol, pot-bellied, and made of earth-brown faience, reclined eternally on its back and seemed to watch the motes in a beam of sunlight from the slotted wall. Dropping prone in the dust that had gathered about the idol through ages, the king gave homage and implored an oracle to illuminate and guide him in his need. Presently a voice issued from the god's navel, like a subterranean rumbling:

"Go forth, and seek the gazolba in those isles that lie below the orient sun. There, on the far coasts of dawn, thou shalt again behold the living bird which is the symbol and the fortune of thy dynasty. And there, with thy own hand, thou shalt slay the bird."

Euvoran felt greatly comforted, since the utterances of the god were thought infallible. It seemed that the oracle implied in plain terms that he should recover the lost crown of Ustaim with its avian superstructure.

Returning to the palace, he sent for the captains of his proudest galleys of war which lay at anchor in the tranquil harbor, and ordered them to prepare immediately for a long voyage.

When all was made ready, King Euvoran went aboard the flagship which was a towering trireme with oars of beefwood and stout sails dyed in saffron and scarlet. A long banner flamed at the masthead, bearing the gazolba bird in its natural colors on a field of cobalt. The rowers and sailors were giant Negroes, and the soldiers who manned the vessel were fierce mercenaries from desert kingdoms. Going aboard, the king took with him certain of his concubines, his jesters and musicians, as well as an ample stock of rare foods and liquors, so that he should lack for nothing.

Also, mindful of the prophecy of Geol, he armed himself with a longbow and a quiver filled with hawk-feathered arrows. And he carried a sling of lion-skin and a blow-gun of black bamboo from which tiny poisoned darts were discharged.

IT SEEMED that the gods favored the voyage. A wind blew strongly from the west, and the fleet, numbering fifteen vessels, was borne with bellying sails toward the risen sun. The farewell shoutings of Euvoran's people on the wharves were soon stilled by distance; and Aramoam's marble houses on its palmy hills were lost in a floundering bank of azure.

Trusting in the oracle of Geol, who had never failed his fathers, the king made merry as was his custom. Reclining beneath a canopy on the poop of the trireme, he

swilled from an emerald beaker the wines and brandies that had lain in his palace vaults, storing the warmth of long-sunken suns. He laughed at the ribaldries of his fools, and his women diverted him with harlotries older than Rome or Atlantis. But always he kept at hand, beside his couch, the weapons with which he hoped to hunt and slay again the gazolba.

Auspicious winds blew steadily, and the fleet sped onward with the great black oarsmen singing and the gorgeous sails flapping loudly. After a fortnight they came to Sotar, whose low-lying coast of cassia and sago barred the sea for a hundred miles. In Loithè, the chief port, they paused to inquire for the gazolba bird. There were rumors that the bird has passed above Sotar; and some of the people said that a cunning sorcerer named Iffibos had captured it with his spells and had shut it in a cage. Hearing this the king landed in Loithè and went with certain of his captains and soldiers to visit Iffibos, who lived in a mountain valley at the island's core.

It was a tedious journey. Euvoran was much annoyed by the huge and vicious gnats of Sotar, who failed to respect royalty and were always insinuating themselves under his turban. When, after much delay in the deep jungles, they came to the crag-perched house of Iffibos, he found that the bird was merely one of the bright-plumaged vultures peculiar to that region, which Iffibos had tamed for his own amusement. The king returned to Loithè, declining somewhat rudely the invitation of the sorcerer, who wished to show him the unusual feats of falconry to which he had trained the vulture. In Loithè the king tarried no longer than was necessary for the laying aboard of fifty jars of that fine cocoanut arrack in which Sotar excels all other orient lands.

Then the ships of Euvoran sailed beyond Sotar and came after thirty days to the seldom-visited isle of Tosk, whose people are more akin to monkeys than to men. Euvoran asked the people for news of the gazolba and received only an apish chattering in reply. He ordered his men-at-arms to catch some of these savage islanders and crucify them on the coco-palms for their incivility. Then men-at-arms pursued the nimble people of Tosk for a full day without catching even one of them. So the king contented himself by crucifying two of the men-at-arms for their failure to obey him.

Beyond Tosk, which was the usual limit of voyaging from Ustaim the vessels entered the Ilozian Sea and began to touch at partly mythic shores and islands charted only in story. But nowhere could the voyagers find a single feather such as had formed the gazolba's plumage; and the quaint people of those isles had never seen the bird.

However, the king saw many flocks of unknown, bright-winged fowl that went over his galleys, passing between the unmapped islets. Landing often, he practiced his archery on lorikeets and lyre birds and boobies, or stalked the golden cockatoocs with his blow-gun.

THE voyagers drove into mornings crossed by gilded lories, and noontides where rose flamingoes went before them to lost, inviolate strands. The stars changed above them, and under the alien Signs they heard the melancholy cry of swans that flew southward, fleeing the winter of undiscovered realms and seeking the summer in trackless worlds.

They held speech with fabulous men who wore for mantles the tail plumes of the roc, trailing far on the earth behind them. They spoke with people whose bodies were covered with a down like that of new-hatched fowl, and others whose flesh was studded as if with pin-feathers.

At noon, early in the fourth month of the voyage, a new and unheard-of shore ascended from the deep. It curved for many miles, with sheltered harbors and crags and low-lying wooded valleys. As the galleys hove toward it, Euvoran saw that stone towers rose on some of the highest crags. But in the haven below them there were no ships at anchor nor boats moving; and the shore of the haven was a wilderness of green trees and grass.

Entering the haven, the voyagers descried no sign of man, other than the crag-reared towers.

The place, however, was full of an extraordinary number and variety of birds. They ranged in size from little tits and passerines to creatures of greater wing spread than eagle or condor. They circled over the

ships in coveys and great, motley flocks, seeming to be both curious and wary. King Euvoran thought that here was a likely haunt in which to track down the gazolba. Arming himself for the chase, he went ashore with several of his men in a small boat.

The birds, even the largest, were plainly timid and inoffensive. When Euvoran landed on the beach, the very trees appeared to take flight, so numerous were the fowl that soared and flew inland or sought the rocks that rose beyond bow-shot. None remained of the multitude visible shortly before; and the king was somewhat annoyed, since he did not wish to leave without bringing down a trophy of his skill. He thought the birds' behavior curious on account of the solitude; for there were no paths except those made by forest animals. The woods were wild, the meadows untilled; and the towers were seemingly desolate, with sea-fowl and land-fowl flying in and out of their windows.

The king and his men combed the deserted woods and came to a steep slope, covered with bushes and dwarf cedars, whose upper incline approached the tallest tower. At the slope's bottom Euvoran saw a small owl that slept in one of the cedars, as if unaware of the commotion made by the other birds in their flight. He trained an arrow and shot down the owl, though ordinarily he would have spared a prey so paltry.

He was about to pick up the fallen owl, when one of his men cried out in alarm. Turning his head as he stooped, the king beheld a brace of colossal birds, larger than any he had yet discerned, that came down from the tower like falling thunderbolts. Before he could fit another arrow to the string, they were upon him, making a loud roar with their drumming wings, and beating him instantly to the ground.

THEN, before his men could rally to assist him, one of the great birds fastened its claws in the cape of the king's mantle and carried him away toward the tower on the crag as easily as a falcon carrying a young hare. The king had dropped his longbow under the birds' onset, and the blow-gun had been shaken loose from his girdle, and all his darts and arrows were spilled. No weapon remained to him, except a small needle-sharp dagger, and this he could not use to any purpose in mid-air.

Swiftly he neared the tower, with the wings of his captor flapping thunderously above him, and a flock of lesser fowl circling about him and shrieking as if in derision. A sickness came upon him because of the height to which he had been carried, and giddily he saw the tower walls sink past him with windows wide as doorways. Then, as he began to retch in his sickness, he was borne in through one of the windows and was dropped rudely on the floor of a spacious chamber.

He sprawled at full length on his face, while the floor seemed to pitch beneath him like a vessel's deck in storm. Recovering somewhat from his vertigo, Euvoran raised himself to a sitting position. Before him, on a sort of dais, between posts of black jasper, was a monstrous perch of gold and ivory. Upon it sat a most gigantic and uncommon bird, eyeing Euvoran disdainfully, as an emperor might eye some gutter-snipe that his palace guards have haled before him.

The bird's plumage was Tyrian purple, and his beak was like a pickax of pale bronze darkening greenly toward the point. He clutched the perch with talons longer than the armored fingers of a warrior. His head was adorned with amber and turquoise quills like a many-pointed crown. About his long, unfeathered neck, rough as the scaled skin of a dragon, he wore a singular necklace composed of human heads and the heads of various feral beasts, such as the weasel, the stoat, the wildcat and the fox, all of which had been reduced to a common size and were no bigger than ground nuts.

Euvoran was terrified by the aspect of this fowl. His alarm was not lessened when he saw that many other great birds were sitting about the chamber on lower and less costly perches, like peers of the realm in their sovereign's presence.

Now to his confoundment the huge Tyrian-feathered bird addressed him in human speech, with a harsh but majestic voice:

"Too boldly thou hast intruded on the peace of Ornava, isle that is sacred to the birds; and wantonly thou hast slain one of my subjects. For I am the monarch of all

birds that fly, walk, wade or swim, and I hold my capital in Ornava. Justice shall be done upon thee for thy crime. But if thou hast aught to say in thy defense, I will give thee hearing now. I do not wish that even the vilest vermin should accuse me of inequity."

Blustering, though afraid at heart, Euvoran gave answer:

"I came hither seeking the gazolba, which adorned my crown in Ustaim, and was feloniously reft from me with the crown through the spell of a lawless necromancer. I am Euvoran, King of Ustaim, and I bow down to no bird, not even the mightiest of that species."

The ruler of the birds, seeming amazed and indignant, questioned Euvoran sharply concerning the gazolba. Learning that this bird had been killed by sailors and afterwards stuffed, and that the sole purpose of Euvoran in his voyage was to catch and kill it a second time and re-stuff it if necessary, the ruler cried angrily:

"This helpeth not thy case but showeth thee guilty of a two-fold crime and a thing wholly against nature. In my tower, as is right and proper, I keep the bodies of men that my taxidermists have stuffed for me; but it is not allowable that men should do thus to birds. In retribution I shall commit thee presently to my taxidermists. Truly, a stuffed king will enhance my collection."

Snapping his great beak, the bird-monarch turned to Euvoran's guards:

"Away with this vermin. Shut it in the man-cage and keep a strict watch."

Euvoran, urged by the pecking of his guards, was compelled to climb a sloping ladder with rungs of teak that led to a room above in the tower's top. In the center of this room stood a bamboo cage capacious enough for six men. The birds drove Euvoran into the cage and bolted its door upon him with their claws. One of them remained beside the cage, eyeing him vigilantly through the bars; and the other flew out through a window and did not return.

THE king sat down on a litter of straw, which was all that the cage provided for his comfort. Despair lay heavy upon him, and it seemed that his plight was both dreadful and ignominious. The things that had happened to him were monstrous beyond imagining. It was monstrous that a bird should speak with human speech, should dwell in royal state with servitors to do his will and the pomp and power of a king.

And monstrous above all was the doom that the bird-monarch had decreed for Euvoran.

After a while, as he pondered dismally, water and raw grain were set before him in earthen vessels by fowls that came and departed in silence. Still later, as the day drew toward sunset, he heard men shouting and birds shrieking below the tower; and together with these noises came clashings as of weapons and thuddings as of boulders loosened from the crag. Euvoran knew that his men were assailing the place in an effort to rescue him. The noises mounted, and there were cries of people wounded and a shrilling of harpies in battle. But presently the clamor ebbed away, the shoutings grew faint, and Euvoran knew that his men had failed to take the tower.

Hopeless, he sat with bowed head while the sun went down, gilding the bars of his cage through a western window. Soon after sunset a night guard came in to relieve the day-flying fowl who watched the captive king. The newcomer was a nyctalops with glowing yellow eyes. He stood taller than Euvoran, and was formed and feathered like a great burly owl. Euvoran was uncomfortably aware of the bird's eyes, burning upon him more vigilantly and balefully as the dusk deepened.

The moon rose, a little past the full, and poured its spectral quicksilver into the room. It paled the eyes of the bird, so that they seemed less watchful and formidable. Euvoran took heart and conceived a desperate scheme.

His avian captors, thinking all his weapons lost, had neglected to remove from his girdle the small needle-tipped dagger. He gripped the hilt stealthily under his mantle and pretended a sudden illness, groaning and tossing and throwing himself convulsively against the bars. The nyctalops came nearer, curious to learn what ailed the king; and stooping, he leaned his owlish head between the bars above Euvoran. And the king, feigning a more violent convulsion, drew his dagger from its sheath and struck

quickly at the outstretched throat of the bird.

THE thrust went home, piercing the deepest vein. The bird's squawking was choked by his own blood; and he fell, flapping noisily, so, that Euvoran feared that the tower's occupants would be wakened by the sound. But it seemed that his fears were groundless, for nothing stirred in the chambers below; and soon the flappings ceased and the nyctalops lay still in a great heap of ruffled feathers.

The king shot back the bolts of the latticed bamboo door with little difficulty. Going to the head of the teakwood ladder, he peered down into the room beneath, and saw that the bird-king slept in the moonlight on his gold and ivory perch, with his terrible pickaxe beak under his wing. Euvoran feared to descend, lest the ruler should awake and see him. Also, it occurred to him that the tower's lower stories might well be guarded by such fowl as the nocturnal creature he had killed.

His despair returned; but, being of a crafty bent, Euvoran conceived another scheme. With much labor, using the dagger, he skinned the slain nyctalops and cleaned the blood from its plumage as best he could. Then he wrapped himself in the skin, with the head of the night-bird rearing above his own head, and eye-holes in its burly throat through which he could look out amid the feathers. The skin fitted him well enough because of his pigeon-breast and pot-belly; and his spindle shanks were hidden behind the bird's thick-feathered legs as he walked.

He descended the ladder, treading cautiously and making little noise, lest the ruler of the birds should awaken and detect his imposture. The ruler was all alone, and he slept without stirring while Euvoran reached the floor and crossed the chamber stealthily to another ladder, leading to the next room below.

In this room there were many huge birds asleep on perches, and the king could hardly breathe for terror as he passed among them. Some of the birds moved a little and chirped drowsily, as if aware of his presence; but none challenged him.

He went down to a third room, and was startled to find within it the standing figures of many men, some in the garb of sailors, and others clothed like merchants, and others nude and painted with bright ores like savages. A deathly stillness was upon them all. Remembering that which the bird-ruler had told him, Euvoran divined that they were persons who had been captured like himself and had been slain by the birds and preserved through avian taxidermy. Trembling, he passed down to another room, which was full of stuffed cats and tigers and serpents and various other enemies of bird-kind.

The room below this was the tower's ground story, and its windows and portals were guarded by several gigantic night-fowl similar to the one whose skin Euvoran wore. They eyed him alertly with their fiery golden orbs and greeted him with the soft whoo-whooing of owls. Euvoran's knees knocked together behind the bird-shanks; but, imitating the sound in reply, he passed unmolested among the guards.

Reaching an open portal, he saw the moonlit rock of the crag below him. Still mindful of the birds that watched him, he hopped down from the door-sill like a fowl and found his way precariously from ledge to ledge, till he reached the slope at whose bottom he had killed the little owl. Here the descent became easier, and he soon came to the woods around the harbor.

Before he could enter the woods, there was a shrill singing of arrows around him, and the king was wounded slightly by one of the arrows. He roared out in anger and dropped the mantling bird-skin. The arrows ceased, and Euvoran was greeted by a great shout from his own men, who were returning to assail the tower by night. Learning this, he soon forgave the jeopardy in which they had placed him.

Boarding his flagship he ordered his captains to set sail immediately. Knowing the baleful power of the bird-monarch, he was apprehensive of pursuit; and he thought it well to place a wide interval of sea between Ornava and his vessels before dawn, when his escape would be discovered. The galleys drew from the tranquil harbor, and rounding a southern promontory, they went due east below the moon.

Euvoran, sitting in his cabin, ate abundantly to make up for his fasting in the man-

cage. And he drank a whole gallon of palm-wine and a jarful of the potent pale-gold arrack of Sotar.

HALFWAY between midnight and morning, when the isle of Ornava had fallen far behind, the steersmen saw a wall of ebon cloud that rushed swiftly upward across the westering moon. Higher it climbed, spreading and toppling, till the storm overtook Euvoran's fleet and drove it on through weltering, unstarred chaos. The ships were borne far apart in the gloom; and at daybreak the king's trireme was alone in a headlong tumult of waves and clouds. The mast was shattered, the oars were lost or broken; and the vessel was a toy for the tempest.

For three days and nights, without glimmer of sun or star through the boiling murk, the vessel was hurled onward as if caught in a cataract pouring relentlessly toward the world's verge. Early on the fourth day the clouds began to break a little; but the wind still blew like a hurricane from hell.

Then, looming darkly through spray and vapor, a strange land arose with beetling rocks and precipices. Though the broken oars had now been replaced, the helmsman and rowers were powerless to turn the doomed ship from its course. With a mighty crashing of its carven beak, and a terrible rending of timbers, it struck on a low, foam-hidden reef. Its lower decks were flooded quickly, and the vessel began to founder, with the poop tilting sharply and more sharply, and water frothing at the lee bulwarks.

Euvoran lashed himself with ropes to an empty wine barrel and cast himself from the sloping deck. Those of his men who were not already drowned in the hold or swept overboard, leaped after him into that raging sea. Many clung to broken spars or casks or planks. But some were drawn under in the seething maelstroms, and others were beaten to death on the jagged rocks. And of all the ship's company, the king alone was cast ashore with life unquenched within him.

Half-drowned and senseless, Euvoran lay where the surf had spewed him on a shelving beach. Soon the gale forgot its violence and the billows came in with falling crests. The clouds went over in pearly fleeces; and the sun, climbing above the rocks, shone down upon Euvoran. He, still dazed from the sea's buffeting, heard dimly and as if in dream the shrilling of some unknown bird. Opening his eyes, he saw between himself and the sun, poising on spread wings, that varicolored glory of plumes and feathers which he knew as the gazolba. Crying again with a voice harsh and shrill as that of the peacock, the bird hung above him for a moment and then flew inland through a rift amid the crags.

Forgetful of all his hardships and the loss of his proud galleys, the king unbound himself in haste from the barrel; and rising giddily, he followed the bird. It seemed to him that the fulfillment of the oracle of Geol was now at hand. And hopefully he armed himself with a cudgel of driftwood and gathered heavy pebbles from the beach as he pursued the gazolba.

BEYOND the cleft in the crags, he found a sequestered valley with quiet-flowing springs, and exotic trees, and fragrant shrubs in blossom. Here, from bough to bough before his astounded eyes, there darted great numbers of fowl that wore the gaudy plumage of the gazolba. Among them, he could not distinguish the one he had followed, supposing it the avian superstructure of his lost crown. The multitude of these birds was beyond his comprehension: since he and all his people had thought the stuffed bird unique throughout the world. And it came to him that his fathers had been deceived by the sailors who had slain the bird in a remote isle, swearing later that it was the last of all its kind.

Wrath and confusion filled him. But Euvoran knew that a single bird from the flock would still stand as the emblem of his royalty in Ustaim and would justify his quest among the far orient isles. With a valiant hurling of sticks and stones, he tried to bring down one of the gazolbas. But always, as he chased them, the birds flew before him from tree to tree with a horrid shrieking and a flurry of splendid plumes. And at length, by his own good aim or a chance cast, the king brought down a gazolba.

As he went to retrieve the fallen bird, he saw a man in tattered, uncouth garments,

armed with a rude bow, and carrying over his shoulder a brace of gazolbas tied together at the feet with wiry grass. The man wore for headgear the skin and feathers of the same fowl. He came toward Euvoran, shouting indistinctly through his tangled beard. The king, surprised and furious, cried loudly:

"Vile serf, how darest thou to kill the bird that is sacred to the kings of Ustaim? And knowest thou not that only the kings may wear the bird for headgear? I, who am King Euvoran, shall hold thee to accounting for these deeds."

Eyeing Euvoran, the man laughed long and derisively, as if he found much to amuse him in the king's aspect. Indeed, Euvoran presented a spectacle far from kingly: for his garments were much bedraggled and were stiff and stained with drying seawater; and his turban had been snatched away by the waves, baring his baldness. When the man had done laughing, he said:

"Truly, this is the first and only jest that I have heard in nine years, and my laughter must be forgiven. Nine years ago I was shipwrecked on this isle. I am Naz Obbamar, a sea captain from the far southwestern land called Ullotroi, and the sole member of my ship's company that survived and came safe to shore. In all those years I have held speech with no man, since the isle is remote from the maritime routes and has no people except the birds.

"As for your questions, they are readily answered. I kill these fowl to avert the pangs of hunger, since there is little else on the isle for sustenance apart from roots and berries. And I wear on my head the skin and feathers of the fowl because the sea stole my tarboosh when it flung me upon this strand. I know nothing of the strange laws that you mention; and moreover your kingship is a matter that concerns me little, since the isle is kingless. You and I are alone, and I am the stronger of the two and the better armed. Therefore be well advised, O King Euvoran. Since you have slain yourself a bird, I counsel you to pick up the bird and come with me. Truly, it may be that I can help you in the matter of spitting and broiling this fowl."

THE wrath of Euvoran sank within him like a flame that fails for want of oil. Clearly he saw the plight to which his voyage had brought him in the end; and bitterly he discerned the irony that was hidden in Geol's oracle. He knew that the wreckage of his fleet was scattered among lost islands or blown into seas unvoyageable. And it came to him that never again should he see the marble houses of Aramoam, nor administer the dooms of law in the justice hall, nor wear the gazolba crown amid the plaudits of his people. Being not wholly bereft of reason, he bowed to his destiny, saying:

"Naz Obbamar, there is sense in what you have said. Therefore lead on."

Laden with the spoils of the chase, Euvoran and Naz Obbamar followed a trail into the isle's interior. Here, in a rocky hill, Naz Obbamar had chosen a roomy cave for his abode. The captain made a fire of dry cedar boughs and showed the king how to pluck his fowl and broil it over the fire, turning it slowly on a spit of green camphor wood.

Euvoran, who was famished, found the meat of the gazolba far from unpalatable, though somewhat lean and strongly flavored. After they had eaten, Naz Obbamar brought out from the cave a rough jar of the island clay containing a wine he had made from certain berries. He and Euvoran drank from the jar by turns, and told each other the tale of their adventures, and forgot a while their desolate fate.

After that they shared the isle of gazolbas, hunting and eating the birds as their hunger decreed. Sometimes, for a great delicacy, they killed some other fowl that was more rarely met on the isle, though common enough, perhaps, in Ustaim or Ullotroi. And King Euvoran made himself a headdress from the skin and plumes of the gazolbas, even as Naz Obbamar had done.

Mrs. Pellington Assists

BY SEABURY QUINN

So often the inexplicable must have a totally implausible, if not impossible answer!

DISTRICT ATTORNEY EDAM looked up from the two small oblongs of cardboard his secretary had laid on his desk. MRS. BRUCE CARNABY, read the first, and, less formal, but no less elegantly engraved, the second announced MRS. WALLACINA PELLINGTON, MEDIUM. "What the cockeyed devil?" he inquired of

Heading by FRED HUMISTON

no one in particular, and punctuated the question with a sigh, half of annoyance, half of sheer weariness.

The case of Bruce Carnaby had given him a lot of trouble, and the trouble wasn't over yet. When a respectable citizen breaks down and absconds with the funds of the bank of which he has been cashier for twenty years, or when one man shoots another, or breaks into another's shop or dwelling, it's all run of the mill. But when a playboy rich man's son has suddenly foresaken all his gilded ways, gotten married and settled down to serious business, then suddenly attempts to kill his wife with a knife, that is something else.

Of course, they said Bruce Carnaby was crazy. High-priced psychiatrists declared in all solemnity he suffered from hyperesthesia and that the attack was an attempt at lust-murder. The State's psychiatrists retorted cynically that they had never known a case where a man attempted lust-murder on his wife, and suggested the police apply Vidocq's formula of *cherchez la femme.* Nor was the woman in the case elusive. Investigation showed Bruce had, as the saying went, been keeping company with a fortune teller who called herself Countess Czerni and was entirely too good-looking to be completely respectable. He had given her expensive presents and a number of impressively sized checks, and had been seen with her on numerous occasions. It was a story far from novel in either divorce or police courts, but it established a motive for the crime.

Other examinations followed. The doctors found no trace of cerebral disease, the patient's mind was crystal-clear, he had no physical weakness. But he denied all memory of the assault; indeed, he seemed bewildered by the accusation. The man was medically sane, but Edam might have strained a point and refused to prosecute if Old Man Carnaby had not attempted to high-pressure him, offered unlimited financial backing in a campaign for the Senate if he would not seek an indictment.

That settled it. No rich old buccaneer was going to dictate to the district attorney as long as Key S. Edam was in office. He pushed through the indictment, calendared the case for trial, and—asked for a continuance. The wife refused to testify against her husband, and there was no way he could make her. He was stymied, thwarted, checkmated, just as he was about to show old Osborn Carnaby a thing or two. Now here was the wife—his only hope of making the case stick—come to see him, with a medium in tow. It was a damn wonder she hadn't brought Prester John or the Akound of Swat. "Show 'em in, Miss Cartwright," he told his secretary, "and if you hear a funny noise don't be alarmed. It'll just be me going unquietly mad."

The women Miss Cartwright ushered in were opposite as the poles. Young Mrs. Carnaby was exceptionally attractive, tall as a tall man, yet feminine as a hairpin. Her heather-toned tweed suit was manishly tailored, but with the coat cut to fit tightly over sleek hips and high breasts. From russet shoes to brown felt hat she was a picture—of the sort one often sees in *Town and Country,* not so often in *Vogue.*

Mrs. Pellington might have stepped down from the screen of some movie showing the adventures of an old-maid schoolma'am. She was on the wrong side of fifty, and everything about her revealed a woman of edges, not of curves. Her clothes were obviously ready made and not from the best shops, the hat that crowned her tightly drawn-back graying hair had plainly been home-trimmed, and none too skillfully.

They made an utterly incongruous pair, dissimilar in appearance and probably in thought as *The New Masses* and the *Wall Street Journal.*

Edam rose and indicated two chairs across the desk from his, then waited, wondering what next. For a long moment no one spoke, but as the silence stretched to the point of embarrassment Mrs. Carnaby broke it: "I've decided to tell everything, Mr. Edam. I don't expect you to believe me, but"—her voice receded, almost stopped, then went on as if driven by sheer will power—"you have a right to know, and if you choose to disbelieve it's your responsibility, not mine. "

"Yes, Mrs. Carnaby?" he prompted, his tone casual and friendly, not demanding confidences, merely inviting them.

The lady crossed her shapely silk-sheathed legs and readjusted her brief skirt to hide

at least a portion of her kneecaps, then looked at him with the fixed, dreamy stare of a pupil about to recite a lesson learned by rote. She spoke almost wearily, her voice so tired and discouraged that it might have been an old woman's.

"It all began when Bruce and I first visited Countess Czerni," she began.

"You mean you called on the—on Countess Czerni?"

"Yes, sir. Bruce and I have been married ten months, and returned from our wedding tour eight months ago. Last month, just after Thanksgiving, my class at Smith had a reunion at the Champs Elysées, and the girls were raving about Countess Czerni. They talked so much about her—how she read their pasts like open books and foretold things that came true—that I decided to pay her a visit. You see"—a light flush dyed her naturally pale cheeks a faint rose—"Bruce and I are expecting—that is—in the spring—"

Edam nodded understandingly. "Just so, Mrs. Carnaby."

She thanked him with her eyes and resumed: "Naturally, I wanted to know certain things. A baby—especially the first one—isn't just something casual, and—"

Once more Edam nodded. "I see what you mean. You went to visit Countess Czerni, and your husband—"

"Went with me. I was afraid to go alone, so like a fool I made Bruce go with me. Everything might have been all right if I hadn't. Have you seen the Countess' place?"

He shook his head and she went on: "It's simply out of this world. Full of show and staginess, some of it dramatic, some pretty corny, but exceedingly impressive, just the same. The first floor of the old brownstone mansion where she has her *atelier* is beautifully furnished like a private residence. An English butler lets you in, and in a little while a young man in a morning coat, striped trousers and a pale-green turban comes into the drawing room and takes your cards up to the Countess. He also collects a fee of twenty-five dollars from each client.

"We waited for perhaps ten minutes in the drawing room, then the young man came back and led us up a wide carpeted stairway that led into a sort of antechamber. This was a long, narrow room with chalk-white walls, a gold ceiling and a black composition floor that shone like polished onyx. The place was redolent with a mixture of exotic scents, the fragrance of incense, the odor of flowers, and something I could not quite distinguish, but which stung my nostrils faintly. The smell struck me unpleasantly and roused a disagreeable memory that troubled me, then suddenly I placed it. During our wedding trip Bruce and I had visited a little bistro in Mexico City, and the gentleman who took us there had told us many of the patrons were addicted to marijuana. It was this I smelled in Countess Czerni's antechamber."

Edam scribbled a quick memo on his blotter, then nodded to the lady to proceed. "Yes, Mrs. Carnaby?"

"The only furniture in the apartment was a big crescent-shaped bench of some dark wood thickly inlaid with mother-of-pearl, that stood almost in the center of the room and faced what seemed the entrance to another chamber. This was an arched doorway hung with black velvet curtains embroidered with the signs of the zodiac in silver. To the left of this door was a marble statue of a woman."

She paused again and shuddered slightly, as if with sudden chill, and Edam prompted, "The statue was a nude?"

"No, sir, not at all. The figure was life-size, or nearly so, and represented a woman seated on a sort of throne. She was habited in a long gown like that of a nun, with a leather belt and knotted girdle encircling the waist. Her hands were crossed demurely on her breast and her head was bent a little, as if she prayed, or perhaps listened intently, but instead of being covered with a nun's wimple and veil the head was crowned with luxuriant long hair, smoothly parted in the middle and braided in two long plaits that fell forward over the shoulders and reached nearly to the knees. Across this, halfway back on the head, had been draped a veil which hung down to the hem of the gown and was held in place by a narrow diadem of metal which circled the brows. Beneath the hem of the long gown the statue's feet showed. Like the hands crossed on the breast they were delicately formed, with slender, fingerlike toes terminating in tapering ends and tipped with filbert-shaped nails. They

were shod with sandals laced to the feet by four strands of beads that passed between the slim straight toes.

"The statue's face was beautiful, with small, regularly formed features with an intangible something about them that went beyond mere beauty, something so closely akin to life it seemed somehow to respond to the beholder's gaze and hold it, whether he wished to look back or not.

"'Ain't she a honey?' I heard Bruce whisper after we had sat there gazing at the statue for perhaps three minutes. 'I never saw anything so beautiful.'

"Actually, I think he was just a little frightened. The mysterious air of the house and all the solemn play-acting surrounding the Countess which made approaching her like trying to see royalty, had gotten on his nerves. You've seen the same thing when someone starts to tell a ghost story, and a member of the company says, 'Oh, I don't believe in ghosts!' in an unnecessarily loud tone, and begins clowning in a way to divert attention from the story and the storyteller. That's how it was with Bruce that afternoon. He sat there for another moment, then got up and crossed over to the statue, grinned in its face and chucked it under the chin, then bent suddenly and kissed it on the lips.

"That kiss seemed like a signal. He had hardly taken his lips from the statue's when the lights began to dim, a deep-toned gong sounded three resonant strokes and the black curtains at the doorway began to draw back, seemingly of their own volition. 'Enter!' we heard a voice bid, and stepped across the threshold into Countess Czerni's consultation room.

"THE velvet curtains closed behind us with a sound like someone sighing gently, shutting out the last faint ray of light from the antechamber, and we were in impenetrable darkness, a darkness so intense it seemed to press down on us like a physical weight. I don't remember ever having suffered from claustrophobia before, but suddenly it had me in its grip. A panic like that we experience when we choke upon a bit of food came on me, my throat seemed stuffed with cotton-wool, there was a frantic feeling in my breast near my heart; I was utterly demoralized, frenzied, fainting. I knew I'd smother, drowned like a rat in a trap, if I couldn't escape from that suffocating darkness, and, scarcely knowing what I did, I turned to find the doorway by which we had entered.

"You know how futile that was. There are no more directions than there are colors in absolute darkness, and my panic had increased to the point of almost utter frenzy when suddenly a faint light showed in the blackness. It seemed tiny, far away, like the gleam one sees at the end of a long tunnel, but gradually it increased, and as it grew the cloyingly sweet scent of sandalwood and myrrh and frankincense became stronger, and a draft of chilling air, like that you feel when an ice-storage pit is opened, blew on us.

"The light that showed against, but did not lessen, the darkness was cold and phosphorescent, without a hint of warmth, but as I watched it seemed to take form, outlining a pointed opening like a Gothic window in a church, or the recess in a triptych, and by its cold illumination we could make out the figure of a woman garbed in a straight-hanging robe like that of a nun bound at the waist with a broad belt of gilded leather in which sparkled blue and green and white gems, and with a plaited girdle of silk cord looped three times round her waist above the belt. Her hands were joined before her breast, palm pressing palm, and her face bowed upon them, so that at first all we could observe was that a veil of blue silk tissue had been draped over her head, and was held in place by a narrow band of gold like a coronet.

"The chilling draft that blew through the dark increased, and we could hear the gentle lisping of the velvet curtains behind us as they rubbed against each other in the breeze. The woman raised her head and looked full at us, then stepped down from her niche and advanced.

"Her costume was as prim and nunlike as the habit of a *religeuse*—a long-sleeved, high-necked gown of blue silk with a dress-length veil to match—but on her it seemed positively lecherous. It was incongruous as a painted courtesan at vespers in a country church. As she stepped toward us we saw her feet were shod with sandals of black parchment and that four strands of tiny

aquamarines strung on gold links passed between the slender toes whose nails had been enameled brilliant crimson.

"She walked with a peculiar grace, a sort of gliding, flowing movement which reminded me of the tread of a lithe, supple leopardess, and I think she was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. She was dark, dark with that mysterious, compelling beauty not possessed by one woman in a thousand. Her cheeks showed not a trace of color, but were pale with the rich, creamy tint of old parchment, which made her vividly red lips seem all the brighter. Her small head was poised majestically, and the black hair, smoothly parted under the blue veil, was woven into long braids that hung across her shoulders nearly to her knees, full and thick as twin umbrella-cases. Her eyes were long and narrow, black as onyx, set far apart and tilted a bit endwise, and her mouth was wide and passionate, the lower lip almost heavy in its fullness. She looked patrician, almost royal, and mysterious as night-veiled Isis herself.

"For a moment she regarded us with an almost amused look in her heavy-lidded eyes, then raised her right hand as if reaching, and suddenly, as if evolved from nowhere, there was a great crystal cupped in her fingers, a crystal ball as large as a grapefruit that glowed with a cold inward fire like a monster opal. It was a trick, of course, a piece of cheap theatricalism that any prestigitator in a night club could have equaled, but in that setting, and as worked by her, it was effective; positively uncanny. I felt a little chill go rippling up my spine and through my cheeks, and something deep inside me seemed to whisper, 'This woman is powerful!'

"A man might have been so absorbed by her beauty that the warning would have escaped him, but women, though they may admire other women's beauty, are objective in their admiration, so I felt something more than a mere sense of her power. I felt her innate evil, and the same instinctive urge that told me she was powerful warned me, 'Beware, for she is also wicked, and means you no good!'

"She cradled the sphere in her long slim fingers and we could see the faint glow of the blood through her white skin against the light that seemed to throb and pulse inside the crystal. Its opalescent sheen was mirrored in her eyes as she gazed into it. For several minutes she looked fixedly at the crystal, her lips moving soundlessly, like those of a devotee kneeling in church, then she raised her head and looked at Bruce, and her eyes seemed to be all pupil, like those of a cat in a dim light. When at last she spoke, her voice made me think of stroked velvet:

" 'Man, for you I foresee ecstacy, such ecstacy as you had never thought to know on earth. But you will have to sacrifice, give up much that you hold dear for it, and in the end you may have nothing but the joy of giving and memories for payment.' "

"SHE TURNED away from Bruce and looked at me, and now her heavy lids had lowered till her eyes were mere bright slits between the lines of her long lashes. 'Woman,' she told me, 'you are fated to give all you prize and treasure that the happiness of others shall be accomplished.'

"I was frightened; absolutely terrified. 'Does that mean I shall not recover when the baby—' I began, but she laughed softly, and the laugh was even more terrifying. There was no smile in her eyes or on her lips, yet the gurgling malicious laugh came from her throat—as if it crawled between her lips—mocking, goading me like some cruel jest.

" 'You have heard the reading of your fate,' she answered softly, and that note of almost gloating laughter underlaid her words. 'The answers to your question lie in the future.'

"The cold green light that emanated from the crystal began to fade, grew faint and fainter till its last gleam vanished, and we were once more left in utter darkness. As if it were that of another person I heard my own sobbing, and felt Bruce's arm about me. 'Don't let it get you down, sweetheart,' he comforted. 'It's all a lot of damn foolishness. There's nothing to it—'

"And then there came a peal of laughter through the darkness, high, sweet, but utterly inhuman in its mockery and spitefulness. 'Wait and see, man; wait and see!' we heard the Countess' voice from what seemed a great distance. 'You who have placed the nubile kiss upon the presentation of the

Daughter of the Pharaohs and vowed yourself to her by that salute—wait and see!'

"Bruce was furious, but when he tried to find her there was no one to find. He stumbled in the darkness like a person playing blind man's buff. When presently he lit a match we found ourselves in a bare room. The floor and walls and ceiling were all polished black, and as far as we could see there was no entrance to the place but that by which we'd come. Every bit of stage property had mysteriously disappeared. There was no trace of the niche in which we had seen the Countess appear, nor any sign of a door through which she made her exit. It was as if we stood in a storeroom, or in the gallery of a coal mine, from which everything had been stripped. At last we left, but it was days before I had recovered from the shock of that encounter."

"D'ye mind?" Edam asked conventionally as he stuffed his pipe and lit a match. Then, as the tobacco took fire: "This is all very interesting, Mrs. Carnaby, but just what has it to do with—"

"I'm coming to that," she broke in almost sharply. "I told you Bruce and I have been married ten months. The star-dust shouldn't be rubbed off our romance by that time, yet almost from the day we called on the Countess he began to grow cool to me. At first, I didn't really notice it; thought it might be business worries or something like that, for he was working terribly hard to impress his father with his reformation, but there were little things no woman—certainly no woman married less than a year—could overlook. He forgot to kiss me good-night or good-morning. It wasn't pointed, as if he avoided kissing me. That I could have understood and thought he'd become angry about something. If that were so, even though I had no consciousness of offending, I'd have been glad to confess my fault and make up. But he forgot. He was forgetful and indifferent. That's what hurt so cruelly.

"I tried in every way I knew to win him back. Wore my prettiest gowns when we went out and my most fetching negligées when we stayed home. I might have saved myself the effort. He was perfectly polite, of course, but for all the notice he took of me I might have been one of the stenographers in his office, or perhaps a girl cousin whom he'd known so long that she was like the furniture around the house.

"Just before our—our trouble—an expressman came with a package for Bruce. I know I shouldn't have done it, but I opened it, and when I saw what it was I almost fainted. It was a reproduction of the statue we had seen in Countess Czerni's antechamber, not more than eight inches high and made of some white substance that weighed scarcely anything, but so cunningly executed that even the little strands of beads that held the sandals on her feet were perfect. I counted them. There were four beads visible in each strand between her toes and the hem of the long gown that reached to her insteps."

"I DON'T know whether you'll understand this or not, but suddenly I went mad with rage. Somehow, in some way, I knew, that woman had come between Bruce and me. She was at the bottom of his sudden coolness, now. . . . An open fire was burning in the hall, and I hurled the statuette down on the hearth with all my might, and battered its fragments with the fire irons till they had been reduced almost to powder. 'That's that,' I told myself when I had worked my rage off. 'Now maybe things will take a turn for the better.'

"That evening, just before the time Bruce usually came home, I went into his dressing room. On the table where his shaving things were laid the statuette was seated, showing no sign of the ruin I had wrought in it that afternoon. The sight of the thing enraged me, and I repeated my performance of the afternoon, smashing it to fragments and throwing the pieces into the wastebasket.

"When Bruce came home I made some trivial excuse to follow him to his room. As coldly white and virginally new as if it had just left the moulder's hands, the statuette of Countess Czerni sat on his bureau, and for the first time it seemed to me I caught a whiff of the strong, heady perfume I had smelled while we sat in her antechamber.

"Bruce went to his study that night directly after dinner, and I heard nothing more from him. I waited until almost midnight, then tiptoed to his study and rapped on the door gently. There was no answer,

and I tried the knob, and when I found the door unlatched, went in.

"My husband sat at his desk, hands upon his knees, staring fixedly before him, and on the desk a foot or so from his face sat the statue of Countess Czerni. Instinctively I knew that he had sat like that since he had left me in the dining room—and the way he looked at that thing was the way he used to look at me sometimes when we had just been married.

"I haven't my red hair for nothing, Mr. Edam. The feeling that possessed me was like a momentary fit of insanity as I rushed across the room and snatched the statuette off Bruce's desk. 'It's hard enough to have you fall in love with another woman, and neglect me and treat me like a stranger,' I screamed, 'but when it comes to being replaced by a statue—' I dashed toward the fireplace, intent on throwing the thing into the flames, but Bruce's voice arrested me.

" 'Put that down,' he ordered, not loudly, but with an awful, deadly earnestness that sent the shivers through me. 'If you harm her I'll—' he took a paper knife up from the desk and held it like a dagger—'I'll cut the heart out of your breast.'

"He advanced on me, and if I ever saw hatred in a human face I saw it in my husband's that instant. His lips curled back from his teeth like those of a teased dog, and though his hot and angry eyes seemed darting about the room, somehow they stayed fixed on me. 'Put her down,' he ordered again in that hard, choked whisper, 'or—'

" 'I'll show you!' I screamed back and hurled the statuette against the wall with all my strength. I saw it shatter like a china plate as it struck the plaster, and heard its fragments rattle on the floor with a shrill, bell-like clatter. Next instant I felt a sharp burning pain in my left shoulder and knew that Bruce had fleshed the six-inch paper knife in me.

"I don't know whether it was fear of death or maniacal fury that lent strength to me, but in an instant we were grappling like two mad things. We were no longer man and woman, or huband and wife, we were a pair of blood-mad beasts, snarling, grabbing, scratching, tearing, even biting in the fury of our combat. Bruce is no weakling, but for the moment I was stronger. I tore the knife out of his hand and hurled it into a far corner of the room, then forced him, step by fighting step, to the small washroom that lets off the study, thrust him into it and snatched the door shut, twisting the key in the lock till it snapped in my fingers as if it had been glass."

"I DIDN'T realize it, but both of us must have been screaming threats and curses as we fought, for I had scarcely locked Bruce in when Williams the chauffeur and Arthur the houseman came running to the study. 'Get the police,' I told them. 'Mr. Carnaby's gone crazy, he tried to kill me—' Then for the first time I realized the front of my negligée was sopping with blood and my left shoulder pained terribly. I think it was then that I fainted, for I remember nothing more till the police came and asked me for a statement.

"I realized both Arthur and Williams had given testimony, so when they asked me if we'd quarreled I admitted it, and told them Bruce stabbed me. Of course, I said nothing about the statuette. It was hard enough for me to believe the thing had been smashed three times, and grown miraculously together after every breaking, though it had been I who had broken it, and as for telling them that Bruce was fascinated by it, and looked at it as a man should look at the woman he loves—I needed my freedom to think this thing out, and I knew they'd have me in a psychopathic ward before you could say 'Knife' if I were to relate that part of the tragedy."

Edam knocked the dottel from his pipe as she concluded her statement. Good Lord, did he have two lunatics on his hands? "What became of the statuette?" he asked.

"Next morning it was intact, showing no trace of the damage I had done it; sitting with demurely bowed head and folded hands on my husband's dsk."

"U'm? Where is it now?"

"Will you excuse me?" She rose and hurried from the room, returning in a moment with a paper-wrapped parcel. She stripped the outer wrappings off and laid aside the layers of white tissue beneath, disclosing an exquisitely wrought image of a woman in quaint medieval costume seated in a throne-

like chair, head bowed upon clasped hands, a smile inscrutable as Circe's on her lips. He picked it up and weighed it in his hand. It seemed made of some plasterlike substance, yet had an oddly fleshlike feel. As near as he could judge it weighed a scant three ounces.

He looked at the calm, smiling face, the exquisitely wrought hands and feet, the long, demurely braided hair, and felt a sudden wave of anger at the woman sitting opposite him. This was the figure of a saint, a woman whose exquisite beauty was matched only by her inward goodness. What right had Rita Carnaby to injure it? Why couldn't she have let her husband admire it? Why had she broken it—whoa! Broken it? That was absurd. There was no faintest trace of blemish on the statue's smooth white surface, not so much as a nick or crack. If she had dashed it into fragments as she said—

"Excuse me," Mrs. Carnaby repeated as she leant across the desk and took the statue from him. "See, this is what I mean." She hurled the figure to the floor with what seemed like superhuman strength. It shattered into minute bits, some almost powder, none larger than a dime. "That's the way I've broken it three times already. Yet you saw it a moment ago as perfect as if it had never suffered so much as a crack." She gathered the small pieces in her hands and let them fall into the wastebasket with a soft tinkling sound. "Tomorrow it will be whole once more," she stated simply.

FOR a moment he felt that strange surge of anger again, then took control of himself. If the woman wanted to destroy a piece of obviously valuable bric-à-brac it was no affair of his. "Let me see," he asked. "You broke this statuette three times before, just as you did a moment ago, yet each time it's miraculously mended. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you expect me to believe this?"

Her eyes suffused with tears as she shook her head slowly. "No, sir, I don't. But it's the truth."

"You have nothing to add to your statement?"

"I don't think so—"

"But I have!" Mrs. Pellington spoke for the first time, and as Edam looked at her he realized she was less mousy than he had thought. True, there was a fine lacework of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, and her hair was streaked with gray, but the eyes themselves were bright and intelligent, the gray was delicately distinguished-looking, and her mouth was almost like a girl's.

"Yes?" he queried, hardly knowing whether to be more amused than annoyed. "What is it, Mrs. Pellington?"

"This Countess Czerni, as she calls herself, is not the first one of the name. Near Eckartsau, in Hungary, in 1540 there lived a Countess Magdalena Dorottya Ilona Czerni, who was famed throughout the countryside as a prophetess—to use no stronger term. She could foretell things, especially unpleasant things, which would happen to her neighbors, and tradition tells us her predictions never failed." Mrs. Pellington's oddly girlish mouth curved in a smile as she added, "We've changed our nomenclature since the sixteenth century, Mr. Edam, but facts are pretty much the same. Today we call it fortune telling, sometimes clairvoyance, in the Middle Ages they called it witchcraft, and they were quite right. For the Countess Czerni was a witch. Not one of those old women with warts and whiskers who rode on broomsticks and kept disreputable black cats about the house. Oh, no! She was so beautiful that it was said few men could look on her without becoming her slaves. For those few able to resist the charm of her beauty she had other, and less pleasant, charms. Like Gilles de Rais and other monsters of the medieval period she was intensely pious. The chapel of her chateau was adorned as richly as the king's own, she heard Mass every day and even went about in a sort of conventional costume. Not the kind the real nuns wore, that would have detracted too much from her beauty. She designed one for herself, a long, monastic robe of silk with a belt of gilded leather set with precious stones and a silk cord in place of the nun's hempen girdle, and instead of the coarse sandals worn by the Carmelites and other discalced orders she had sandals of the thinnest, lightest velum with strings of jewels for straps. Her feet were very beautiful and she was very vain of them. She bathed them every morning in a bowl of ass' milk, and sometimes—we'll come to that

late. Of course, she never cut her hair. It was one of her chief beauties, reaching quite down to her knees, and when she shook it out unbound it hid her like a veil. By day she wore a blue silk veil over it and held it in place with the golden coronet that denoted her nobility.

"The story goes she had her statue carved in this costume, and the likeness was so lifelike all who saw it vowed the sculptor must have sold his soul to the devil to acquire such skill.

"Please remember that statue, Mr. Edam, it's important. When Countess Czerni failed to win a man with her beauty she was in the habit of having a tiny reproduction of her statue sent to him. Somehow, that never failed. The man to whom she sent that miniature invariably ended by creeping to her chateau *'lamber pedes dominae,'* as the old Latin chronicle puts it—'as he had been a whipt dog to lick his mistress' feet.' Of course, the men she honored with her favor were handsome; naturally they were also wealthy. Often they were also married, and usually their wives objected. So when the statuettes arrived the ladies did just as Mrs. Carnaby did, smashed them. And just as Mrs. Carnaby failed, so did those medieval ladies. The statuettes were miraculously—perhaps a better word would be diabolically—mended each time they were destroyed, and remained with the gentlemen the Countess' fancy had fixed on until the will to resist was broken. Then—*lambere pedes,* and the rest of it. To love Countess Czerni was an expensive luxury. She stripped her lovers to their last square foot of land and last brass penny, and when they were completely impoverished—" Mrs. Pellington made a gesture of tossing something into the wastebasket—*"kaputt!"*

Edam shifted in his chair uncomfortably. "I don't quite see—"

"Of course, you don't," the lady conceded. "That's why I'm telling you. I am a spiritualistic medium, as you know, and naturally sensitive to psychic phenomena. Two nights ago at a séance at my house I kept getting a message—I don't quite know how to put it so you will understand, but if I say it was like a persistent interference when you're trying to get a certain program on the radio that will be near enough. Finally, I decided to let the spirit seeking to get through to me have her way. There really wasn't anything else I could do, she kept interrupting so persistently. The moment I made myself receptive Carmen Carnaby came to me."

"Carmen Carnaby?" repeated Edam. "H'm. I seem to recall that name—"

"I'll refresh your memory. She was Osborn Carnaby's wife, Bruce Carnaby's mother, who died when the steamship *Morro Castle* burned off the Jersey coast. She was begging me to save her son from Countess Czerni. It was she who told me where to find the old chronicles in the library, she who told me to go to her son's wife and explain that Bruce had neither turned against her nor gone insane, but was bewitched—powerless under an evil spell. Fortunately, Rita believed me and agreed to come to you with her story, and the statue of the Countess."

Edam rose and bowed with cold politeness. "I'm much obliged for the—er—entertainment, ladies," he said acidly, "but I am rather busy. If you will excuse me—"

"You can't be persuaded?" Mrs. Pellington asked gently. "There's more to this, believe me, than saving Bruce Carnaby from prison. It's a matter of his sanity—perhaps of his immortal soul."

"Good afternoon, ladies," said Edam.

"BOSS, who's the new girl friend?" asked Miss Cartwright as Edam entered the office next morning.

"What d'ye mean?" he asked testily. He was still nettled after his encounter with Rita Carnaby and the medium—wasting his time with their cock-and-bull stories! This morning he was in no mood for pleasantries.

Miss Cartwright winked an eye, and she had most expressive eyes, the sort of eyes that proclaimed their owner knew a thing or two, or maybe three, about life and its foibles. "Oh"—she held her hands apart, the upper some ten inches above the lower—"a little number about so high. Quite a dame, Boss, quite a dame. But I'd be careful with her if I were in your place. She looks to me as if she wouldn't be above slipping the old stiletto between your fourth and fifth ribs if you crossed her up—or maybe just for fun. You men are suckers for a pretty

face, but the woman who can fool another woman hasn't been whelped yet."

"What the devil are you driveling about?" he demanded as he shrugged out of his topcoat and hung it on the rack.

"That statuette right in the middle of your desk. You might have had the decency to put it to one side, at least. I think I feel the pangs o' jealousy beginning to gnaw at my—"

"What?" he almost shouted, and bolted into his office. If this were a joke . . .

It was no joke. Calm as an idol in an altar place the small white statue of the Countess Czerni stood upon his desk blotter, head bowed demurely on clasped hands, the partly mocking, partly tender smile upon its silent lips. He picked it up, examining it minutely. There was no sign of crack or nick on its white surface, yet he had seen it dashed to fragments yesterday. . . . "Who's been here?" he demanded when Miss Cartwright came in answer to his frantic buzzing.

"No one yet. You're earlier than usual, and—"

"Anybody here last night after I left?" He knew there hadn't been. The outer office force would have stopped visitors, and if a caller had succeeded in running their gauntlet Miss Cartwright would have proved a final barrier. He ran his hand along the edge of his desk. A little film of dust adhered to his fingers. Jackson hadn't come to dust last night. The wastebasket still held a few crushed papers. Obviously none of the charwomen had come in either. He scrabbled through the refuse in the basket for a trace of broken crockery, but there was not a crumb to be found. "Well," he admitted finally, "I'll be damned."

"You sure will, Boss, if you go messing round with that dame yonder. She's pure cold poison," declared Miss Cartwright.

"Where's Carnaby?" he demanded.

"Who?"

"Bruce Carnaby. Don't you understand English?"

"At last reports he was at home—not his home, but his father's. Judge Wilkinson set bail at fifteen thousand dollars, and his old man put it up. Remember?" Miss Cartwright knew all the answers, which was one reason she retained her job.

"Well, don't stand there staring like a Chinese mandarin, or mandariness, or whatever the feminine for it is. Get him in here. Send Kerry out to pick him up. Tell him I want another sanity test."

"Think you can get away with it?"

"Don't ask fool questions. Do as I say."

"Yes, sir." Miss Cartwright knew when to drop badinage and get down to business. "Anything else?"

"Yes, get Mrs. Carnaby and Mrs. What's-her-damn-name—the woman who was here with her yesterday. Have 'em here before Carnaby arrives."

ONCE more Edam faced Rita Carnaby and Mrs. Pellington across his desk. "Only a fool would have believed the story you told me yesterday," he declared, "but I'd be a bigger fool not to believe the evidence of my own senses." He tapped the statuette on his desk. "Have you any explanation to offer for this thing's being—er—reassembled?"

Mrs. Pellington spoke as incisively as he. "None that we didn't give you yesterday, Mr. Edam. If I were you—"

"You're not," he snapped. "You are you and I am I, and I'm also the district attorney. My duty is as much to protect the innocent as to see the guilty are punished. Now, in view of what's happened, have you anything to suggest? I'm willing to cooperate in every reasonable way—unreasonable, too, if what I'd thought yesterday is used as a measure." He smiled at them and the whole aspect of his face changed. It was no longer the countenance of "Bulldog Edam," as the papers loved to call him, but of a man of deep and ready sympathy, a man whose charm had won him reelection after reelection against the toughest opposition.

Mrs. Pellington tapped gloved fingers on the arm of her chair. "There—might—be—a—way," she mused.

"What is it?" Once more he spoke brusquely.

"Will you let me run the show exactly as I wish—promise not to interfere, no matter what I do?"

"H'm, that depends," he hedged. "I can't permit you to transgress the law—"

"There'll be no law breaking, I promise, but some of the things I do may seem most unorthodox. It will spoil everything and perhaps lead to irretrievable tragedy if you

interfere in any manner, even to the extent of speaking when I request silence."

Edam smiled at her again. He was beginning to like her. "Very well. This once I'll do exactly as you say. What do you want?"

"Give me that statuette and bring Bruce Carnaby to my house in an hour, or as soon after as he comes here. I'm going to hold a séance—"

"Lord save us! A séance—"

"Just so, Mr. Edam. Remember, you promised—"

"Oh, all right, have it your own way; but if this ever leaks out I'll be politically and professionally ruined."

HALF of the block in which Mrs. Pellington lived was occupied by old brownstone-fronts that had been elegant residences in the Gay Nineties, the further half was occupied by modern apartments, and between the last of the old houses and the first of the new was sandwiched a neat red brick dwelling, small, compact and scrupulously cared for. The brickwork and the three-stepped marble stoop seemed to have been newly scrubbed, the wooden trim of the windows seemed newly painted, even the low iron fence that separated the small lawn from the sidewalk was immaculate. Bright red geraniums bloomed in green wooden boxes behind the shining panes of the front windows.

The room behind the white front door of the house fulfilled the promise of the exterior. Draperies of old-fashioned chintz hung at the low windows, deep chairs and sofas were covered with linen in a warm shade of rose that went well with the gray woodwork. A chest of drawers in bright walnut stood by the wall and over it hung an old mirror framed in gilt. A room to live in, work in and be happy in, thought Edam as he and Carnaby, with Detective Kerry, entered.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Mrs. Pellington greeted. Her small birdlike eyes were very bright as she smiled hospitably. "You could probably do with a drink?"

Edam raised interrogating brows, but Barnaby and Kerry welcomed the suggestion. "Bourbon?" queried the detective.

"Of course, and you, Mr. Carnaby?"

"I'd like a Scotch and soda, if you have it."

The little woman turned her shoulder so her face was visible only to Edam, and her lips said soundlessly, "Rye."

He nodded. "Rye, if it's available," he ordered.

She bustled from the room and returned in a minute with a tray on which the glasses had been set to form the points of a triangle. "Scotch for Mr. Carnaby, bourbon for Mr. Kerry, and rye for Mr. Edam," she announced, indicating the tall tumblers in turn.

"Here's to crime," Carnaby pledged cynically as he raised his glass and drained it almost at a single draft. Edam and Kerry nodded, sipping their liquor slowly.

"The doctors should be here at any moment now," announced the medium, "of course, they may have been delayed—"

"Carnaby! Snap out of it!" exclaimed Detective Kerry. "Good Lord, Mr. Edam, he's passin' out—"

"S-h-sh!" cautioned Mrs. Pellington in a soft whisper. "That's part of the arrangement. I made sure each of you took something different, so I shouldn't have to make it seem too obvious when I indicated your drinks. He's had a mickey."

The underworld expression sounded strangely on her prim, schoolma'amish lips, and Edam started at it. "You mean—"

"Of course. I put just enough chloral nitrate in his drink to induce narcosis—make him semi-conscious, you know, but not quite knock him out. We need him in that condition for our experiment. His conscious mind must have its functions suspended, but the subconscious must be able to operate. Fortunately he chose Scotch, and the kind of Scotch we get nowadays would disguise anything you mix with it. I think we're about ready, now."

She left the room again, this time moving with a step so noiseless that one observing her would have thought she was blown along instead of walking. In a moment she returned with Rita Carnaby, and bore the statuette of Countless Czerni carefully before her, almost as if she feared contamination from it. "Will you draw down the blinds?" she asked Detective Kerry.

Dusk seeped into the room like water as the shutters closed, blurring the outlines of

the furniture, making the occupants seem vague and indistinct as actors in a setting of a Dunsany play. She put the statuette on a small table of polished pear wood and began to stroll about the room, treading soundlessly as a shadow. She was humming softly, a wordless tune that seemed to be no tune at all but just a series of related sounds that blended to a sort of melody, and the melody itself was vague, like something seen through morning mist. "Carmen!" she broke off her song to exclaim softly. "Carmen Carnaby, can you hear me? We're ready for you, Carmen Carnaby. Now is the time to battle—"

She stopped abruptly, almost as if a strong hand had been laid on her throat, swayed, staggered and collapsed into a chintz-covered easy chair.

Edam felt a chill race up his backbone like a swarm of small, cold-footed ants. In a corner of the room he saw a shadow that was darker than the shadows that were there before. Something moved as stealthily as a cat intent on its quest of a sparrow and wafted silently forward, paused an instant by the statuette that gleamed with white coldness in the dusk, and seemed to take on greater substance.

NOW he could make out its outlines, dimly, but with certainty: A woman in a flowing nunlike robe that shimmered dully in the murky twilight. He could see the gilded leather belt that bound her waist and the gems that glistened in it; he saw the braided silken girdle that trailed from her waist to the floor; the jewels set in the diadem that circled her small head and held her long blue veil in place shone dully in the dusk, and as she moved with a light, gliding step he saw the pale glint of the linked gems that laced parchment sandals to her narrow white feet. "Lord save us!" he murmured almost helplessly. Her face was the most beautiful that he had ever seen. Her cheeks were pale with the rich, creamy tint of old parchment, which made her vivid red lips seem all the more brilliant. Her long black eyes, tip-tilted at the outer corners, were like twin pools of fathomless dark water, and the white of her small, even teeth behind the scarlet line of her bright lips was like snow showing against a spot of fresh-spilt blood. He felt the hair rise slowly on his head as the inscrutable dark eyes came to rest on him and lunged forward in his chair, but deep inside his inner consciousness the voice of some remote Hibernian ancestor seemed warning, "Still, you fool! Resist her! That way lies death and damnation!"

"Magdalena!" he heard Carnaby exclaim in a dull, choked voice, and the fascinating, compelling black glance swept past him.

Mrs. Pellington was moaning softly, half-strangling and wholly desperate: "Carmen —Carmen Carnaby!"

Another entity seemed taking form in the dusk-clouded room, the tenuous, wraithlike figure of a woman well past youth, but still retaining traces of her early beauty, and with the loss of youthful fairness more than compensated by a charming calm and dignity. She seemed to move with difficulty, as if motion in the body were an unfamiliar experience, and she had a watchful look about her, as of one upon her guard.

The beautiful phantom that glided toward the semi-conscious man on the divan seemed suddenly aware of the newcomer, for she wheeled like a cat that had suddenly sensed danger, her eyes dilated and furious, her mouth that had been smiling so seductively squared like the mouth of an old Greek tragic mask.

The apparitions circled slowly round each other, each plainly doubtful of the other's strength and distrustful of her own weakness, each watching for an opening, both obviously afraid to come to grips.

The older woman's simulacrum brushed against the small table where the statuette gleamed dully in the shadow, and instantly the table responded by tilting sidewise. Edam was reminded of the table-tilting he had seen at amateur séances when sitters grouped about a table with their fingertips on it, and "the spirits" made the furniture rock, give off knocks, or even dance from one room to another.

Panic seemed to seize the younger shade. She rushed across the intervening space and flung herself protectively before the table, arms outstretched, blue draperies fluttering soundlessly, teeth bared like those of a snarling beast. Edam shivered, felt his scalp begin to itch and tickle, and an iciness creep up his spine. From the contending specters

flowed a current of dull, numbing cold as paralyzing as the absolute zero of interstellar space.

The elder specter drew back, not so much in fear, it seemed, as in repugnance at contact with the other, wafted like a wind-blown cloud in a short arc, and pushed with both phantomlike hands at the table behind the other. The little stand rocked violently, and from its joints there came a crackling like static heard over a radio. The statuette slid almost to the table edge and hovered a moment on the brink as the phantom of the younger woman stretched out wraithlike hands to stop it in its course. There was no contact between hands and image, but the sliding statue hesitated as if it had met resistance, and came to rest just at the edge of the table.

ONCE more the ghostly opponents swept round each other in a circle, advancing and retreating in a sort of terrifying *contre danse*. There was no sound in the room save the medium's sterterous breathing and the low moan from the semi-conscious man upon the couch, but every hovering shadow seemed to be tense and breathless, waiting for some tragic, violent dénouement.

The blue-veiled wraith struck suddenly. Like an infuriated cat she launched herself against the other, fingers flexed like curving claws, teeth bared, eyes fairly flaming.

The other whirled with a quick tortion like the turning of a smoke-spiral in a breeze, rose nearly to the ceiling, swept downward at a sharp angle like a bird swooping from a tree, and struck the table squarely with her whole body.

The solid wood clove through her unsubstantial form as a rock splits a rushing wave, but every joint of it gave off a snapping crack like that of a bone breaking. It shuddered like a building in an earthquake, and with a crash the little statuette went tumbling to the floor and smashed into a hundred fragments.

The effect on the other phantom was catastrophic. She staggered back as from a blow, went suddenly rigid and clasped bloodless hands together in a gesture that seemed to entreat mercy.

Then she began to shudder. It was not the sort of quaking that a natural body undergoes when racked with ague, rather, it was an intense quivering, like that which figures in a motion picture show when the film reels unsteadily through the projector. Her outlines blurred and dimmed, her features lost distinctness and identity, her lovely tapering fingers elongated and became as tenuous as wisps of vapor, and her clinging blue draperies seemed to melt until they were no more than a contorting puff of fog. Then with a sigh like steam escaping from a bubbling kettle she was gone.

The other specter hovered in the darkness for a moment, seemingly uncertain of her next move. Then she drifted to the divan where Bruce Carnaby lay and bent above him. For an instant she pressed a kiss on his forehead, then began to fade. She did not vanish, merely grew less distinct, blending by degrees into the shadows till she became one with them.

Mrs. Pellington stirred uneasily in her chair, made a sound which might have been a cry or a delicate, ladylike snore, and sat up. "What happened?" she demanded as she set the rimless glasses straight upon her nose. "Was anybody—anything—here? Did you see anything?"

"I'll say we did," exclaimed Detective Kerry before Edam could form a reply. "We saw heaven and hell fight to a finish!"

"I thought perhaps you would," returned Mrs. Pellington as she rose and crossed the room to draw the blinds back. A yellow streak and then a blazing oblong of bright light poured through the windows as she undid the shutters, then the room was filled with afternoon sunshine.

Rita Carnaby lay in an easy chair apparently asleep, but as the spate of sunlight swept into the room she wakened. "Bruce!" she murmured sleepily. "Bruce, are you there?" She rose and crossed to the couch where her husband lay. "Bruce, dear," she whispered. "Oh, Bruce, my poor, sweet boy, she held you prisoner, didn't she?" She bent and kissed him on the lips.

Her husband wakened slowly, shook his head to clear it of the chloral fumes, and looked at her in surprise. "Why, Rita darling," he exclaimed, "you're crying. What's the matter?"

District Attorney Key S. Edam looked with wonder mingled with no small amount

of awe at his vis-à-vis. She looked like something in a Grant Wood painting, thin, angular, spinsterish; prim and precise to the point of prudery. He could imagine her in a schoolroom, cowing brash fifth-grade brats to perfect discipline, or in a seminary for young ladies, ruling her unhappy charges with an iron hand. But by no stretch of imagination could he see her down six double Manhattans, wash down a sirloin steak big enough to stop a truck driver with a half-bottle of Bourgogne Supericur, polish off a platter of French fried potatoes and top it all with a great wedge of apple pie on which was scooped a half-pint of vanilla ice cream. Yet that was what he'd just witnessed, and it gave him the uncanny sort of feeling one has when he dreams he sees a pink giraffe with purple spots smoking a Corona Corona and driving a red racing car.

The lady scooped the last forkful of pie and ice cream up with a dexterity that proclaimed long practice and smiled brightly at him. "No, Mr. Edam," she explained, "they weren't both ghosts or spirits as you understand the term. The manifestation of Carmen Carnaby was an authentic visitant from Beyond. From the plane where she now is she'd seen her son fall victim to the wiles—enchantments would be a better term —of Countess Czerni, and tried with all her power to save him. Remember, in the old days, Countess Czerni's lovers lost not only property and happiness, they lost their souls as well.

"I'm happy that she came to me. Spiritualism has been vilely exploited. There are hundreds of authentic mediums, able to communicate with the Beyond, or even to materialize the spirits of the departed, who use their gifts for personal gain, and coin the misery of their clients into profits. Had she selected one of these she could have accomplished nothing, for the wretch would have strung out a long series of séances, at as high a fee as possible for each, and by the time they ended it would have been too late. It makes me feel both proud and humble that she chose me.

Edam nodded doubtfully. "You say both the—things—we saw weren't spirits? Then what—"

"The Countess Czerni's apparition was what's called a 'sending.' You'll find mention of such things in the old Norse and Icelandic sagas and Eddas. The modern Finns and Lapps believe in them, too. They are really a projection of their senders' personalities—their passions and desires made visible and manifest.

"Spiritualism's far from being an exact science. Most things about it we still see through a glass darkly, so I don't know that I can explain why the statuettes of Countess Czerni were so important. It seems that she was able to impart some of her personality—her fierce, insatiable desires, her passions which could not be slaked and her inherent evil nature—to the lifeless effigy that Bruce Carnaby kissed when he first saw her. In a lesser nature, but just as importantly, the small replicas of the statue had power. If I say they were like lenses which brought the rays of her bad thoughts and worse intentions into focus I'd probably be somewhere near the truth. In the olden days she sent these statuettes to the men on whom her fancy fixed, then she directed her desirous thought-waves toward the statuette, and this, as a sort of psychic transformer, concentrated and strengthened the thought-waves till they had almost irresistible force, especially in view of the fact that the man was already smitten by her beauty, and so predisposed to suggestion—not that most men need suggestion in such circumstances. Do I make myself clear?"

"You said she sent this statuette to Bruce Carnaby 'as she did in the old days.' What do you mean by that? Are you implying—"

"Not implying, only guessing, Mr. Edam. I told you yesterday that I had studied the old chronicle of Countess Czerni. The thing concludes most unsatisfactorily. It seems that when the civil and ecclesiastic authorities at last got round to looking into her case they had little luck. The officers sent to arrest her found only her statue in the Chateau Czerni. Of the Countess herself there was no trace. So the statue was placed formally on trial, found guilty of witchcraft, heresy, and a number of other high crimes and misdemeanors. The sentence was that it be 'buried alive' in the north side of the parish churchyard. The north side of the churchyard, you know, was 'the devil's side,' reserved for burial of suicides, unbaptized persons, those dying excommunicate and similar

undesirable residents for respectable cemeteries. No one ever actually saw the dead body of Countess Czerni—no one ever identified the *corpus delicti*, as you lawyers say. There's nothing but the lapse of time and probability to tell us that she ever really died at all. We might be certain she was dead if she'd been an ordinary woman; but that was just what she wasn't. She was a witch if ever there were one, and witches have things called 'familiars,' you know. Familiars had the power to assume the witch's form, and the witch, in turn, could change herself into the form of her familiar. It might be possible this statue was the Countess' familiar, whose form she assumed when the law caught up with her, and in whose guise she was buried in the churchyard. If that is so, nothing could have been easier than for her to come to life again, dig herself out of the grave, and go on her merrily wicked way right down to our time."

She paused and Edam ordered, "Go on," in an I'll-see-it-through-if-it-kills-me voice.

"Very well, you asked for it: By something like hypnosis worked through the medium of the statuette, she made Bruce Carnaby her thing and chattel. He was as mindless as a statue himself—and as powerless to resist—when she gave him orders. All he could do was obey. So when Rita threatened to break the statuette it was not Bruce, but Magdalena Czerni, who swore to kill her, and almost succeeded. You can see that, can't you? To charge him with assault with intent to kill is as unjust as to indict the knife or pistol a criminal uses in his crime, or to prosecute a telephone for slander because some character-assassin has used the 'phone to spread false accusations."

Edam nodded again. "Bruce and Rita certainly seemed like a pair of love birds when they left your house this afternoon. No one would have thought they'd ever had so much as a love-spat."

"Then you'll dismiss the case?"

"Not quite. I'll have it set back on the calendar, and if everything goes well with them for six months I'll enter a *nol. pros.* But—"

"Yes?" queried Mrs. Pellington brightly.

"How the devil did that statuette mend itself? I saw Rita smash it in my office, yet next morning it was good as new."

MRS. PELLINGTON shook her head. "I have a theory, but I can't be certain. It's my belief that that statuette was not made of plastic at all, but formed of ectoplasm excreted by the Countess herself. Ectoplasm, in case you don't know, is a substance taken from a living body by spirit forces in order to produce materialization. It is believed to be essentially a physiological form of energy of a chemical composition essentially the same as that of the body or bodies from which it emanates, in which it differs from psychoplasm, which is essentially spiritual. This statuette was a photographically exact copy in minature of the statue in Countess Czerni's anti-chamber. Such perfect reproduction would be possible if shaped in ectoplasm by thought, but almost impossible to accomplish by hand, no matter how skillful the sculptor might be. Ectoplasm is strongly cohesive. Its particles have as great an affinity for each other as copper and mercury have, so if they were forcibly separated they would tend to go together again if not too far apart."

From her antique reticule she drew a silver cigarette case with a raised design that might have been a crest, chose a king-size cigarette and lit it with a lighter cleverly concealed in the case as Edam demanded:

"But won't the statuette that broke in your parlor today go back together, and won't that be just where we came in?"

"No." She spoke with brusque authority. "There's no chance of that—now. That statuette was more than just a portrait of the Countess. It was her other self—perhaps most of her. Like her it was a sensate incarnation of the basest passions, the female principle made manifest in flesh—or ectoplasm, which is essentially the same thing. By it she worked her magic, brought men to her feet as spiders lure flies to their lairs. But it was something more. It was a symbol of her boundless vanity and ego. When her wickedness was met and outfaced by the purity and strength of Carmen Carnaby's mother-love she knew she was defeated, completely and utterly routed. And just as the Sphinx could not brook the humiliation of having her riddle solved by Œdipus —waiter!" she raised a long, thin forefinger and beckoned to a servitor who hurried past.

"Yes, Madame?"

"Bring me a copy of the *Evening Globe*, please.

"I'm not sure it will be here," she told Edam as she unfolded the paper, but—yes, here it is."

She indicated an item in the third column on page ten:

"Magdalena Dorottya Ilona Czerni, noted society fortune teller known locally as Countess Czerni, died in her studio, 817 No. President St., shortly after 1 o'clock today. She was about to give a reading to a client and was found dead in her consultation room by Arnold Bustonby, her secretary. Dr. Jason Fortesque, 892 No. President St., was called and made a tentative diagnosis of heart failure, but Coroner H. Ramsey Jewett has determined an autopsy will be necessary.

"Miss Czerni came to this country in 1892 and has no known relatives here. Public Administrator Homer Hartley will take charge of her estate for the benefit of creditors and such heirs as may be found later."

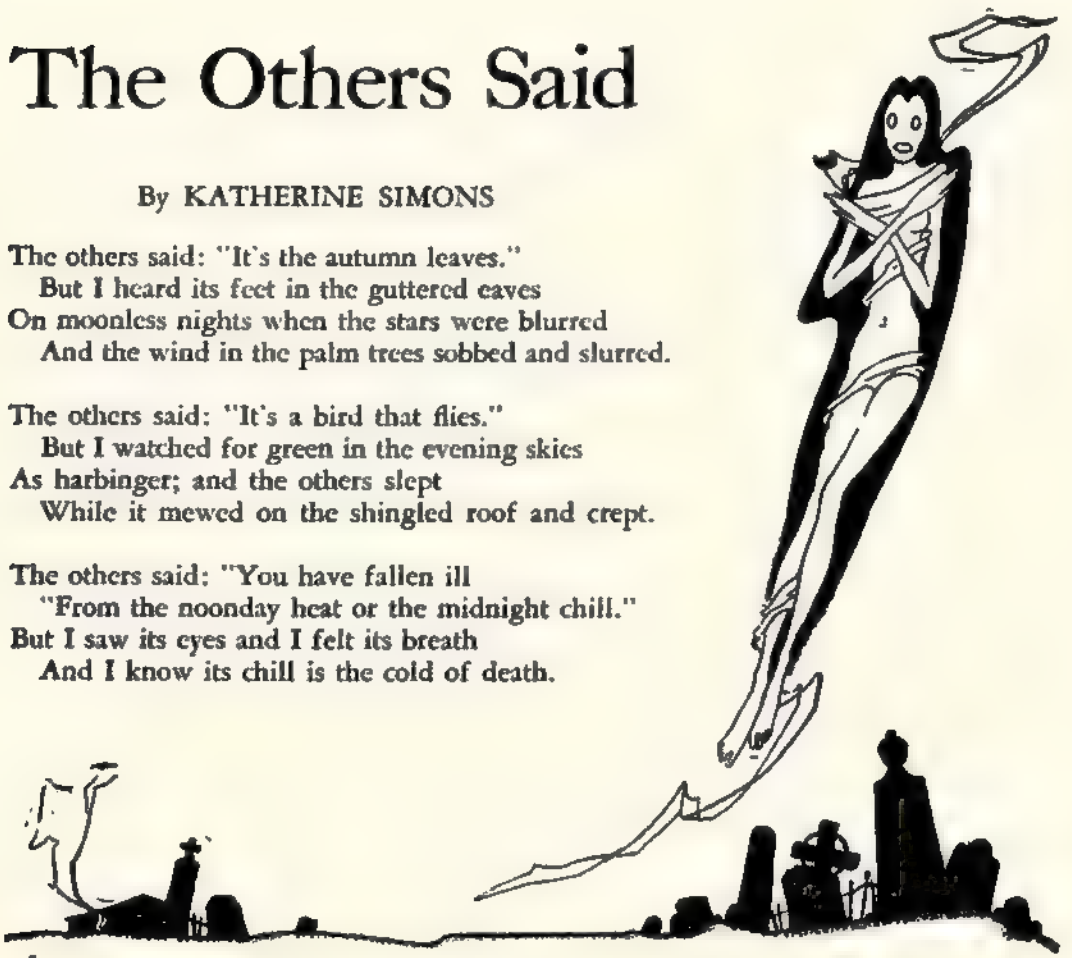
The Others Said

By KATHERINE SIMONS

The others said: "It's the autumn leaves."
But I heard its feet in the guttered eaves
On moonless nights when the stars were blurred
And the wind in the palm trees sobbed and slurred.

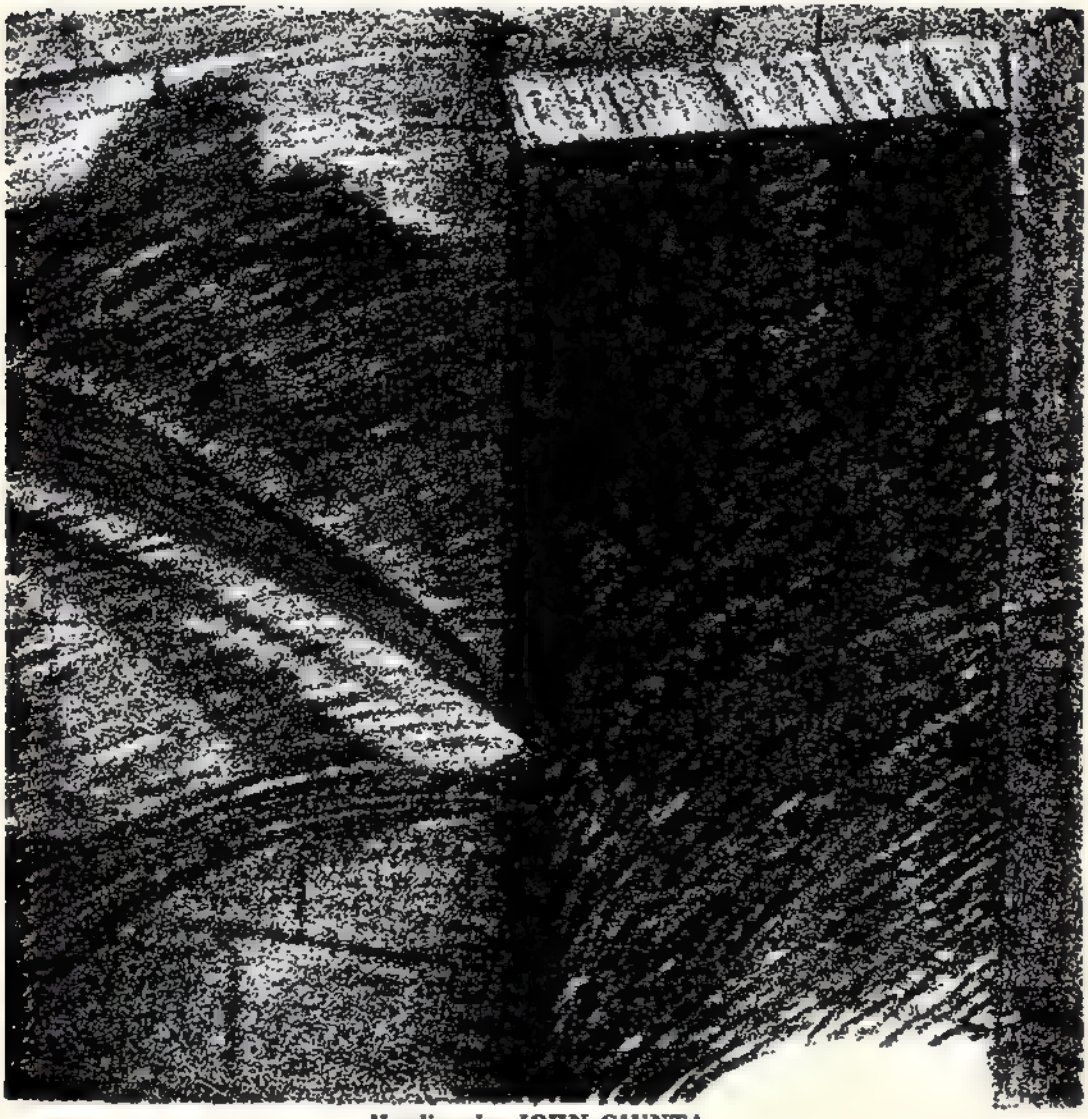
The others said: "It's a bird that flies."
But I watched for green in the evening skies
As harbinger; and the others slept
While it mewed on the shingled roof and crept.

The others said: "You have fallen ill
"From the noonday heat or the midnight chill."
But I saw its eyes and I felt its breath
And I know its chill is the cold of death.



The Damp Man Returns

BY ALLISON V. HARDING



Heading by JOHN GIUNTA

TO MAKE a name for himself on a metropolitan paper, a reporter must have (a) a terrific story; (b) a terrific exclusive story; and (c) a terrific exclusive story that his city editor will print.

George Pelgrim mused on this as he sat in the Green Eaves Bar and Grill. He'd rung the bell on the first two requirements, but his editor on the *Gazette*—there was a tough baby.

Pelgrim glanced at his wrist-watch. In half an hour he was meeting Linda. He took for the umpteenth time that day the

For want of a better word, a man—but there the resemblance ends!

Canadian postmarked envelope out of his pocket and looked at the letter from his uncle. As he read over again the penned words, headlines formed in his mind, and a first-page number-one column story materialized. "The Damp Man" would be the identifying lead, and the story was as strange or stranger than any readers were likely to come across in our time.

Pelgrim remembered the last time he'd seen the Damp Man, whose uncommon fixation on blonde and beautiful Linda Mallory was strange only because of its fanaticism and degree. He remembered the nightmarish quality of those moments in a northern Canadian town where the giant lumbering creature had pursued them through a park on a night so cold that the very air, as he and Linda sucked it in, seemed to be a congealed thing. And he recalled how the Damp Man was gaining and then suddenly lagged and stopped, sat down on a bench as though a man grown weary of the pace.

With Linda safely away George had come back through the still night; the only movement being the white plume of air as he exhaled. He could have sworn the Damp Man was a frozen thing now and he remembered turning away from the rigid figure without conscience.

It was fortunate that his uncle was a trustee of the hospital up there, and through him the strange reports filtered out. The reports were appalling, but they were true if science is any yardstick of truth, and to George it meant the greatest story of his career.

However, the reluctance of the Canadian press to issue one line of intelligence on the matter was matched by his own city editor down here on the *Gazette*. The whole episode was covered in a small item, stating merely that the multi-millionaire Remsdorf, Jr., was confined to a hospital in a small Canadian town where he'd been visiting when taken ill.

Lother Remsdorf, Jr., was the son and sole heir of the brilliant scientist who'd been destroyed in the mysterious explosion of his laboratory fully two decades ago. No trace of his body or unique scientific data had ever been found.

"You're out of your mind!" City Editor McBrien had flayed at Pelgrim when George had hinted at the immensity of the story at hand.

"Those interests (meaning Remsdorf) are big enough to buy this sheet, big enough to buy you and me and this whole town, most of the country, too!" McBrien went on to say the paper's publisher and owner would never stand for such a thing.

THIS was one of the frustrations of the newspaper business; the "you-can't-print-that" barrier. George wondered, though, if these things that his uncle discreetly reported to him in special delivery letters didn't sneak out even with scientists' ethics being what they are. For Lother Remsdorf, the scion and offspring of millions, was no ordinary man.

He was something else, impossible perhaps for even a scientific mind, much less the laity, to evaluate. Yet it had started simply enough; the removal of a man apparently completely frozen to the Canadian town's hospital morgue. In the morgue this man had come to life again, but that can happen. Doctors have pronounced the undead dead before, and will again.

It was the tests that told the strangest tale. For when Lother Remsdorf was recuperating in the northern hospital, the routine yardsticks were applied to him as they are to all patients. It was then, so the secretly dispatched reports from his uncle revealed, that some astonishing discoveries were made. Lother Remsdorf's veins, for instance, were not filled with blood but with some sub-hemolytic fluid not far removed from the substances in a jelly fish.

The average human, scientists know, is made up two-thirds of water. The Damp Man was ninety-five per cent water. His organic functions, as they revealed their secrets one by one to the tests that were applied, were sluggish, slow-functioning machines beyond any conceivable range of normalcy or abnormalcy.

His uncle, Pelgrim noticed, more than once commented on reports from the hospital that Remsdorf consumed fantastically extravagant quantities of fluids. Consequently, he required very little in the way of solid food.

George put the envelope back in his

pocket. He paid his check and walked out into the spring sunlight. It was Saturday, and Linda, when he met her at the drugstore corner, had on a Saturday dress and a bright smile to match. With the dreadful and unwanted affections of Lother Remsdorf removed, she was again her age of the early twenties. They talked little of the times when he'd first met her. She still did some competitive swimming—that was one of the things which had drawn Remsdorf to her initially, that she should start with him a new race of beings based on her physical acquatic abilities and his physiological affinity for water.

They had a nice Saturday afternoon, George and Linda. They walked in the park like so many other couples that afternoon, his arm around her supple waist. Regretfully he took her back to her boarding house early after supper. He was working on a Sunday feature about the disappearing trolley car, and deadline was approaching.

IT WAS nine p.m. when he unlatched his apartment door and saw the yellow oblong of a telegram lying on the floor. The message was from his uncle. It was terse and to the point. It had been sent that morning. "Remsdorf escaped hospital during night. Whereabouts unknown."

His uncle's use of the word "escaped" meant to George that Remsdorf was not supposed to be, by any means, through with his official hospital visit—in the opinion of hospital authorities.

George sat down in a chair by the window and tried to think. He discarded the idea of calling Linda up and warning her. After all, Remsdorf supposedly did not know the girl's address. He wondered as he had before at Remsdorf's persistence. Originally it had been none of his affair. Beyond his affection for Linda there was no reason why he should risk his job and his life, battling someone so entirely monstrous and determined as Lother Remsdorf. And yet he knew he would continue to battle him until one or the other of them would be done forever, if only for Linda's sake.

Public officials are fearful of highly placed pressure, George knew, and dependent as they are for their livelihoods on votes and patronage, they are sometimes easier to handle than private citizens. If this whole grisly thing could be forced into the spotlight—and why couldn't it?

He'd had trouble pleading his case with McBrien. But what about the publisher of the *Gazette?* He was the man to see. Not a small, wizened penny-cautious Milquetoast like Pelgrim's city editor. Instead, he would see the *Gazette's* owner, and see him soon if it were humanly possible.

It was a tossing and turning night for George. He heard the city sounds gradually put themselves to sleep until finally there was nothing to keep his troubled mind occupied but the square of light on the ceiling reflected from the streetlamp outside and below.

He'd seen his publisher only once before. The occasion was when he'd been a cub and it concerned the legal aspects of his report on a "jumped or fell" story. Publisher Tohler was a flint-eyed man with a raspy voice and a huge chart of circulation hanging behind his chair. You stood in his presence and you spoke only when spoken to.

In the small hours of the morning Pelgrim got up and drew himself a glass of water.

On his way back to bed he paused for a moment beside the window and looked out. The street was deserted—except that lounging against the base of a lamppost across the way was a man. He was small, nondescript, but his eyes were turned upward toward George's floor and his own window. The reporter went back to bed frowning.

The next day George made his desire known to City Editor McBrien. The other raised his eyebrows.

"If you've got any bright ideas about how you're worth more to this paper, I'm the man to see—and the answer is no!"

GEORGE hastily assured him he was not interested in seeing Mr. Tohler to ask for a raise. McBrien ferreted around and grumbled when George refused to give his reason.

"Either you get the appointment for me or I'll do it through his office direct," was Pelgrim's ultimatum.

The city editor mumbled something about "ungrateful young pups."

A few days later the reporter received word from the publisher's office that he'd been granted a fifteen-minute appointment in two weeks. Pelgrim cursed at the delay but the tone of the note allowed no argument.

Since the night he'd noticed the little man standing outside his apartment building, George had had the ever-increasing feeling that he was being followed. In the days when Remsdorf himself had lumbered after him and Linda, there'd been no question. Now his pursuer was a shadow that came and went, something to be seen out of the corner of one's eye, so lacking in substance that not once again had George been able to get a true picture of a face or form.

If he walked at night down a long street, though, there were always footsteps or a figure somewhere back of him in the gloom. If he taxied, there was another cab behind. It was because of this that George had avoided going to Mrs. Brumley's to see Linda. This enforced separation from her made him unhappy. Their conversations made him unhappy.

"Hello Linda, dear."

"Hi, George!"

"I'm not coming up and you'd better stick close there."

He tried to hide the news about Remsdorf but he suspected that she guessed. Several times he pleaded with her, "Why not get out of town? You're in the clear. You've got those relatives in the West."

But she wouldn't, and when he asked her the reason, she said, "Well, never mind," but he thought he knew and it pleased him because he certainly felt the same way too. He finally told her that he thought he was being tailed; no, not by Remsdorf, he hastened to add. Did she miss him? Sure did. It was pretty tough just sitting around up there, wasn't it? Well, she read a lot but couldn't they . . . couldn't she see him? Meet him somewhere? No, no, not now.

"I'm doing what I think is right," he always ended their phone conversations with and she replied, yes, she knew it and believed in him.

Then they always said small tender things to each other at the end just before he hung up, she to go back into her vacuum of loneliness, her virtual exile at Mrs. Brumley's, and he to match steps and shadows with his pursuers.

Although his work hadn't suffered noticeably, George had been in the office little the last week or so. McBrien grumbled and one or two of his fellow workers joked about it. There were things happening upstairs, the rumor was. It was a good time for a guy to be very much seen and on the job. George shrugged, paying little attention. After all, it was tomorrow he was seeing the publisher.

ELEVEN A.M., the memo from the office had said, and George was sitting in the elaborate ante-room at ten to eleven. He remembered his old-time shyness with Mr. Tohler with some contempt. That was the anxiety of extreme youthfulness, he reasoned. This time he'd talk out from the shoulder. He'd say, "Mr. Tohler, I have the biggest story of this sheet's history. You may think it's a daring thing to print, and there are a lot of reasons why it can't be printed. But there are more why it *must* be!"

At precisely eleven a buzzer rang on the receptionist's desk and she beckoned to him. "You may go in now."

He opened the door and went inside, shutting it behind him. The room was good-sized and looked as if it belonged in a private home rather than an office building. It was booklined. There were wall-length drapes hanging beside the windows.

Mr. Tohler was standing in the center of the room. George had never seen him standing before. He looked tall and thinner than Pelgrim had remembered. Tohler was speaking.

". . . Understand from McBrien you have something of the greatest importance to say to me . . . under the circumstances felt that you should . . . the new publisher . . ." a wave of the hand. "He thought by all means that you should be heard. . . ."

George's head spun and he found himself unable to look away from that grinning face sitting behind the publisher's desk.

The desk that used to be Tohler's . . . but was no more. From a fantastic distance Tohler's voice droned on.

"The new publisher, Lothet Remsdorf. Mr. Remsdorf, this is one of our best reporters, George Pelgrim. . . ."

Sitting there behind the publisher's desk, his mountain of flesh oozing over the arms of a mahogany chair, his pudgy hands clasped before him on the mahogany, staring unblinkingly at Pelgrim, grinning, grinning.

Stories flooded through George's mind, bits of office gossip. The newspaper was Tohler's life and blood, family tradition and all that, meant more to him than his own life. And now this tall austere spare man was acting deferential. He was nobody anymore, no publisher, no business. Just a man standing there in the center of the floor.

Remsdorf waved his hand. "Thank you, Mr. Tohler. Thank you. Now I'm not going to trouble you to stay here with us any longer. I shall listen to Mr. Pelgrim's important, er, thought myself."

Tohler bowed his head servilely and walked from the room. So the gossip George had heard murmured downstairs for the past few days was true. A change in management!

"Yes, I'm the new owner of this newspaper," boomed Remsdorf. "I hope you're going to enjoy working for me, Pelgrim."

There was silence between the two for a moment, and then the big man asked, "Where is she?"

The relief must have showed on the reporter's face, for Remsdorf's frown was sudden and terrible.

"I'll find her!" he gritted. "Early or late, but find her I will! She's to be mine, you understand Pelgrim?"

THERE was a strange unwholesome light that glittered for a moment beyond the black opacity of the fat man's eyes.

"Where is Linda Mallory?" the giant repeated. "I'll make a deal with you, George Pelgrim. I want her and quickly. I know you know where she is and I think you know that I shall eventually find her, but perhaps you can save me time and trouble. Even an hour saved in my quest is worth anything."

The big doughy hands clenched and unclenched. He continued softly.

"I know men's minds, Pelgrim. I know that you believe yourself to be in love with this girl, and in all probability she with you, but I assure you that it is not written in destiny that you two shall belong to each other. I have told you that that girl is entirely necessary to me. A pretty face, a pretty figure, Pelgrim, you can find those anywhere! Thousands, millions of them. You're young. There'll be other girls, dozens of them.

"Linda Mallory is a necessary part of something that an average human such as yourself could not understand. But contemplate, if you can, Pelgrim, with your everyday mind the implications involved. You know, I think, that I am not quite like other men. My life force is in different balance. It is probably no secret from you that I quite baffled the medicos in a certain Canadian hospital by the fact that through my veins instead of blood courses what three learned men described as a water-like serum.

"My organs and their functions confounded them and their pathetic instruments." The fat man's body quivered and shook with inner mirth. He raised his hand from the desk where it had been lying, and George's eyes were fascinated by the small pool of moisture that was revealed.

"Linda has certain abilities that will complement my own. She is the other part of my plan to rear a new race on this earth."

Playfully the May wind tugged at the drapes behind the publisher's chair. George stood like a statue, as though in a trance. This monster-man exerted a strange overpowering influence. The reporter noted the beads of moisture on Remsdorf's flaccid face, and as he watched, Pelgrim felt a knot of nausea tighten in his stomach.

THIS preposterous creature before him, this absurd, macabre, wholly terrifying blob of protoplasmic monstrousness! He watched fascinatedly as a drop of water fell from a pudgy forefinger. How appropriate was the appellation he'd pictured for his newspaper story, "The Damp Man!"

The other watched him closely. "I think I amaze you, George Pelgrim," he rumbled. "But have you ever thought that a race of such as me would be nigh invincible? You know that I am all but indestructible." His laugh was a wet rumble inside that cavernous body.

"Be reasonable. Here is my offer. Surely you know . . ." he waved an arm to include the room and the whole building, ". . . I have no interest in the newspaper business, but it amused me to buy Tohler out. It means so much to him. And yet as we philosophers say, every man has his price, eh?

"Now Pelgrim, I will make you editor of this paper. I will make you publisher of this paper, if you wish, and step aside myself, plus . . ." he flapped his hand in the air, ". . . the payment to you of any reasonable sum, any reasonable sum, I say, which you may want! In return, bring Linda Mallory to me!"

"How do you know I can?" the reporter spoke.

"I have great confidence in your abilities," answered Remsdorf. "My guess and belief is that she's in this city, although so far, my agents have failed to locate her."

"You're responsible for having me followed?"

"Oh yes," admitted Remsdorf. "Yes, I've got you under night-and-day surveillance, Pelgrim. Think over my offer. Make this decision the right way and you'll be set for life, and, as I said before, there are so many other girls in the world."

George cleared his throat. "I don't need to do any thinking. The answer is no!"

"I don't need to remind you that I'm now your employer," said the other man sibilantly. "I can fire you, Pelgrim, at a moment's notice, and I can fix it so that you get no other job in this town. . . ." he leaned forward ominously, his great shoulders hunched, ". . . or just about anywhere else! Think the whole thing over. And . . . there are worse things I can do.

"Oh, incidentally, what was the idea you came up here to talk to Tohler and me about?"

George smiled bitterly. "Skip it. I don't think it would appeal to the new management."

PELGRIM left and went downstairs. He passed McBrien's desk on the way to his own, and the city editor leered at him suspiciously. George sat for a while tinkering with his typewriter, staring off into space blankly. There was a macabre awfulness about the thought of that fat octopus sitting upstairs. Tohler, whatever his unpopularity, had been a newspaperman through and through. Remsdorf had bought him out for only one reason—just a pawn, just another step in his attack against Pelgrim and toward Linda Mallory!

One thing was very sure. He couldn't see the girl now under any circumstances. He must even be careful about phone calls made to her. He wondered if Remsdorf had enough official pull to have a tap placed on his apartment phone.

That night he called her from a pay booth and watched to see that the sallow little man dogging his trail was not near enough to decipher the clicking as he dialed Mrs. Brumley's.

He told Linda tersely what had happened and he pleaded with her again to leave town. She cried a little over the phone and said no, she wouldn't leave, but she had to see him.

They argued a nickel's worth and George felt the frightening hopelessness of trying to persuade her. To quiet the girl he promised that he would try to get up there sometime that night.

He hung up and brushed past the slouched figure of the trailer in the drugstore door. The man hunched his shoulders and followed in pursuit. George took a bus across town, but the little man followed him. He took a cab, switched cabs in midtown traffic. His pursuer was similarly agile. He disappeared down a subway and tried to time his charge into an express. The little swarthy man squeezed through the doors too, though. They sat inside, the little man indifferent while George glowered at him.

They reached the end of the line and George slipped into a movie house. Back of him he heard the sound of someone else fumbling to a seat. The theatre was sparsely populated, and after a little while George got up and started back up the aisle. He saw no one until he got into the lobby, but then his heart leaping with hope that he'd

shaken the swarthy man somehow, slowed with discouragement. The little fellow was making a phone call in a booth, all the while his eyes fixed on the aisle mouths.

George darted sideways, and the phone-booth door slammed open. He ran up steps to the mezzanine level, hearing the soft pad of feet behind him. There was a red sign saying "Rest Rooms." He ducked for it.

The room was tiled, dingy, and Pelgrim wrinkled his nose distastefully, but there was one break. It was completely empty except for himself. He slid behind the door and waited.

For a moment nothing happened, and George matched mental acrobatics with the one who trailed him. The other man's first instinct, of course, was to wait outside, but then almost immediately would come the suspicion that possibly there might be another way, if only a window opening onto a court, or an escape.

The metal door swiveled inward. George waited only to recognize his man and then he swung hard. The vicious blow caught the little man under one ear and crashed him to the tiled floor. George bent over, his fists ready, but there was no further need. The guy was out cold.

Pelgrim whipped out the door and down the steps. He went out front and hailed the first cab he saw. He gave Mrs. Brumley's address and settled back on the cushions massaging his bruised knuckles.

THEY were half-way there when habit caused him to turn around and peer out the window. Out of the sea of traffic behind, there was one cab that stuck with them, turning when they turned, accelerating and slowing when they did. George's heart sank. He countermanded his first order to the cabby and gave his own address.

The little man evidently had had another "little man" following him. He might have known that Remsdorf's resourcefulness would foresee the ambushing of one agent.

He got out at his address and saw the other cab stop up the block and expel a single passenger. It gave him some satisfaction to note that this man was medium-sized and heavy. He hoped fervently that the other fellow would be nursing a bad neck and jaw for several days.

George hesitated a moment, undecided whether to go upstairs and make his call or not. Then he tramped into the corner delicatessen. He got Linda and told her exactly what had happened.

"I'm sorry I can't come," he said tiredly. "You're all right as long as I stay away from you, but I guess that's the way it'll have to be until we think up something else."

The hurt in her voice was something he couldn't bear. He knew she was on edge and nervous. So was he. He cut her short and hung up. There was no use of the two of them beating at each other.

He tumbled into bed exhausted and slept. His sleep was a black and orange and purple thing. First color and then noise. The noise was sharp and insistent. It poked and prodded him until the sleep was gone sufficiently for him to recognize the sound. It was his doorbell.

HE SHOVELED his feet into slippers, reached for the heavy piece of lead pipe he kept by his bed now and scuffed into the hall. He opened the door. It was Linda. Even while he kissed her and felt the warm moisture of her tears on his cheek, he was thinking, Good God, this has done it!

She clung to him and talked on the way a woman does about not caring about anything else but being with him. All the time he was trying to think. She knew less than he did about this hulking abnormal who coveted her being and soul, and certainly this was no place for her. This settled it. They could have only a few moments. Thank the Lord he had some money here.

"You sit down," he ordered. "I'm going to get dressed. We're leaving town tonight!"

He frenziedly piled a few essentials into a bag, threw his clothes on in the bathroom and came back. She looked almost pleased sitting there in the chair. Her face lit up when she looked at him in a way that made him happy.

"You did a terrible thing," he reproached, and then was sorry he'd said it.

"I know," she replied simply.

He was not surprised at Remsdorf or any man becoming obsessed with this blond girl. Her tall, well-formed beauty was breath-

taking. He wrenched his thoughts back to their problem.

"Now listen, we're leaving. We're going to get to a station and get on a train and go out to your relatives. We'll get married as soon as we can. I know this is a hell of a way to propose to you, but this is a hell of a situation we're in."

SHE squeezed his hand. She was going to say something but the sound of squealing brakes drew his attention to the window. He stood there and looked down. There were two men standing in front of the house and a cab had just drawn up. The cab door opened, and out of the black interior stepped Lother Remsdorf!

The three men talked a moment. They looked upstairs at his window and then they walked towards the apartment house front out of Pelgrim's sight. A second later the house phone jangled.

"What's the matter, George?"

He turned away from the window. "It's our pudgy friend," he hastily explained to Linda. "Now look, we've got to go down the back way. Maybe they don't know about that yet. It's a chance. All set?"

"All set."

He showed her the back door. "Open it and stand by it. I'll be right back."

The house phone was still jangling. George picked it up. "Hello?"

Remsdorf's voice came to him. "Pelgrim. I know you have some interesting company up there. I'd like to join you."

"Are you crazy? There's no one up here, and what the hell's the idea of waking me up at this hour?"

"I shall remind you that I am your employer," the Damp Man's laughing gurgle came over the wire. "Invitation or not, Pelgrim, we're coming up."

"Come on!" bellowed the reporter. "Come up and see what a fool you've made of yourself!" He slammed the receiver down and sprinted for the back stairs.

Linda was with him and they thundered down.

On the first floor the escape emptied into an alley. There was no one at the outside door. He pulled the girl along until they came to the alley mouth. Nothing in the street but the cab Remsdorf had come in parked in front of the building. The two ran for it. He jumped in the back.

"Hey, this is taken, Mister," the hackster swiveled his neck.

George waved a ten-dollar bill. "Taken, be damned! We're in a hurry to catch a train. Sick mother. Let's go!"

The cab ground into first gear and started off. They barely pulled away from under the streetlight when a yell went up from behind. They'd been spotted.

"You're going to get me in trouble, Mister," the driver protested.

They turned two more corners and then George ordered the car stopped. "We've changed our mind. Go back and pick up those guys, if you want."

He pulled Linda out. The perplexed driver started back the way he'd come.

"We'll do better on foot. Get a subway three blocks up here near the park. That'll take us right to the station. Come on. Hurry!"

BEHIND them an auto backfired and a motor roared as they sprinted for the square of light heralding the subway stairs. They had crossed the last street, made the final curb when Linda's hand wrenched out of his own. He turned desperately and lunged for her falling body but clutched instead only a flimsy edge of dress. She fell heavily on the cement. He dropped the bag and bent down ready to lift her up.

"Darn it," she gritted through pain-whitened lips, "my ankle . . . on a stone!"

He helped her up but she could hardly stand. She hobbled painfully. Back of them, three blocks away a car came into view.

"Quick!" he said.

The subway entrance was still a hundred yards away, but the wall separating them from the park was here. He boosted her onto its top and vaulted up after her, the suitcase forgotten now on the sidewalk. They fell into the underbrush on the other side. He put his arm around her waist and they made as much time as they could in the darkness and through the bushes.

Behind them they heard the squeal of auto brakes. He strained his ears over the noise of their own progress, and finally the sounds that he feared came to him. The crash and crackle told him that their pur-

suers had spotted the suitcase and the place along the wall where they'd fled into the park.

The ground was uneven. It was rocky in spots; elsewhere the earth was soft. He could tell from the occasional swift intakes of breath that Linda was in pain with her ankle but he had to hurry her on, helping her as much as he could with one arm around her waist.

George had little or no idea where they were headed, but it mattered not at all as long as they kept ahead of the gigantic and sinister Remsdorf and his two little agents.

Finally, as though by mutual consent, they stopped and George looked around them in a circle. On all sides but far away, for they must now be nearly in the center of the park he calculated, were the clustered pinpoint lights of the city. When for a second the reporter heard none but night sounds in the park around them over the thunder of his beating heart, he thought with a wild surging hope that they had eluded the three, but then there was the crackle of a twig and a bush shook itself off somewhere behind them. He knew they had to go on.

Linda gasped when he suggested they start again. She bent over and rubbed her injured ankle.

"How is it?"

She didn't answer. He kneeled down and touched the limb himself. Her ankle was already badly swollen. The sounds of pursuit were louder, and through the trees he caught the faint but unmistakable wink of a flashlight coming towards them.

Instinctively the two turned and staggered forward. He realized now that after yesterday's rain, their progress was easy to follow for anyone with a lamp.

LINDA saw it first and pulled at his arm. Set in the side of a nearby hill was the open maw of a tunnel. He recalled that there'd been a reservoir here and this was one of the channels that had carried pipes to the pumping and purifying galleries. They reeled toward it and went inside.

The ground was damp and the air unwholesome in the tunnel, and as they walked, they bumped occasionally against the dripping walls. They trudged to the farthest end. Here the pipes ran upward and there were rude steps leading to an inspection ledge some fifteen or twenty feet above the tunnel level.

Somehow they staggered up on the ledge and sank to its damp floor. George held Linda's head in his lap. She was shaking with the excitement of the ordeal and the pain of her badly injured leg. Then an arm of light quickly streaked along the tube for a minute, and they knew the three pursuers were already in the tunnel.

By lying flat and against the wall they could not be seen from below. Pelgrim put his fingers over Linda's lips and they waited. Remsdorf and his two assistants were below their ledge talking, shining the flashlight around. Then the voices stopped and the flashlight beam became fixed. The narrow steps had been discovered!

Pelgrim knew it was Remsdorf coming up after them when he heard the first heavy, shuffling tread. The light grew brighter as the reporter gathered himself to spring. It followed the curve of the steps and that was the one thing George counted on. It would be directed naturally at the first area to present itself to the eye rather than searching inward towards the extreme corner near the wall where the two fugitives crouched.

Remsdorf cleared the last step and stood, as George had predicted to himself, near the outer ledge shining his torch directly forward.

AT that precise moment Pelgrim leaped. He hit the fat man before there was a chance to even look or swivel the light inward. He drove with his shoulder and his arms, and great though the weight was of the Damp Man, he staggered under the assault and teetered on the ledge's rim. George made a last lunge, and a great wet hand flayed at him, just missed a hold on his coat.

His opponent toppled off the ledge then, and George himself reeled. It was Linda's capable hands at his own shoulder that steadied him. Below there was the crashing impact of Remsdorf landing on the tunnel floor.

A curious strange noise it was—almost a *wet splashing sound.*

The flashlight was also a victim of the fall and then the first excited chatter of

Remsdorf's two companions died away. There was complete silence.

Pelgrim had no idea how long he and Linda Mallory sat huddled together on the ledge.

Whatever its length, it was a pathetically cruel period of time for it was a hopeful, almost glad space only to be shattered by the first of those unmistakable footsteps on the stairs below—a sound that the mind tried to reject. Because how could a man fall better than twenty feet to a rock-bedded tunnel floor and yet . . . and yet . . . those shuffling approaching steps were unmistakable.

And there were other sounds. Remsdorf was coming back this time in force. George crouched on all fours in the darkness, pushing Linda behind him. At least there was no flashlight this time. The sounds became stronger as they neared, and then without warning the whole colossal obscene weight of the Damp Man landed upon George bearing him to the ground as though he were a child.

He clawed his way partly free only to have fists and knees and shoes in his face. Something hard, a blackjack probably, took him under the ear. He felt and heard Linda fighting desperately at his side against these evil forces. An elbow caught him in the mouth tearing his lip just as another and finally decisive weight thundered down on his head.

* * * * *

Time had neither meaning nor place in the blackness of the tunnel. When George became conscious, he was lying on his back on the ledge with the salt-taste of blood in his mouth. He was alone. There was only the drip of water from the ceiling and walls.

Painfully he hobbled down the rough-hewn steps and felt his way out towards the tunnel's mouth. His watch, lacking a radium dial, availed him nothing. They could be hours ahead of him or merely minutes. He wondered of Linda and breathed a silent prayer for her.

His eyes, grown accustomed to the gloom, picked up a patch of white in the tunnel bed ahead of him. That it was a square of paper was all he could see in the darkness but he picked it up and held it tightly as he stumbled on towards the arch of light that meant the opening of the tube.

It was, unthankfully, not minutes but hours. The light of dawn was just arriving in the sky. He studied the ground outside, but there were many footprints and they were confusing. His head still scrambled from the beating, he'd almost forgotten the most important thing—the piece of paper clutched in his hand.

He looked at it. It was a page from Linda's address book, and scrawled rudely were two names written in lipstick. Somehow, he surmised, in the dark Linda had been able to scratch this note as they took her from the tunnel and drop it in the darkness.

THE letters were ill-formed. George sat on a rock and glowered at the piece of paper. The first letter was a V. The last seemed to be "lift," but then the last letter ran off the page. It meant nothing to him. He crammed the note into his pocket and left the park.

Pelgrim went to his apartment; washed and bathed his bruised body, and thought as he'd never thought before. An inspiration came to him after a quick breakfast. He slammed his hat on his head and took a cab to the *Gazette* offices. One or two of his fellow-workers raised their eyebrows at his battered appearance, but without noticing he tore into the "morgue"—that filing room where research material is stored so essential to every newspaper.

He looked up R — Rems — Remsdorf. Here in these files was elaborate advance data all collected, suitable for any occasion; even prewritten obituaries. He ran his finger down the material and finally found what he wanted. It was the fourth name down under "Real Estate Holdings" that made his heart leap. "View Cliffs."

He tore at his coat pocket and looked at Linda's note again. Of course! That was what she'd meant to write. He left the file room running, to the astonishment of the supervisor, made his own office in nothing flat.

Jim Crosier, who shared the room with him, was there typing industriously.

"Jim, can I borrow your car?" Pelgrim panted. "It's life and death!"

"Why, sure, Georgie," the older man turned toward him. "You know my garage. Only this time when you come back, you might leave as much gas as you see in it when you take it out."

Crosier whistled. "Hey, your face! What in thunder did you. . . ."

But George Pelgrim was gone, sprinting for the elevator. Twenty-five minutes later he was in Crosier's sedan heading north along the Bryan Parkway. View Cliffs was upstate and on the coast. He knew the general location roughly. It took him three hours of hard riding to get there. A local gas-station attendant waved his arm in the right direction.

"You mean Remsdorf, the millionaire's place? That's right out overlooking the water on the cliffs."

George found it, and it was the sort of place you can't reconnoiter in an auto, surrounded by a high wire fence. He cached his car off a side road and looked the situation over on foot.

THERE was a gate but it was locked. The fence was high and every part of it could be seen from the front windows of the ancient castle-like estate that squatted inside the acres like some outre beast. Beyond the house the land dropped off suddenly, and against its granite sides the sea tumbled thunderously.

George stayed out of sight until dark. Then he went to the tree he'd already picked out, shinnied up it, crawled gingerly out on the limb that just poked its outer bark fingers beyond the steel fence, and dropped inside the grounds.

Although the night was dark, the reporter took no chances. He ran doubled over, dodging from tree to tree until he reached an unlighted side of the huge old house. He tried darkened windows until one moved slightly under his fingers. He pushed the frame upward gradually so it would not squeak and then he crawled over the sill.

He was just inside with the window lowered back into place when a shadow passed in front.

It was, George could just make out, one of the men who'd accompanied Remsdorf the night before. As though making the rounds, the figure disappeared into the gloom around the corner of the building.

As best he could, George explored the chamber he was in and the adjoining rooms. They were all empty and dark. Finally though, a murmur of voices led him to a doorway which revealed a flight of stairs leading downward. As he crept down them, the voices grew louder, one of them unmistakably Remsdorf's.

He turned a bend and crouched on a darkened landing above a large room that spread out before him. The scene was incredible, unforgettable.

THIS room originally intended for the furnace and service facilities of a huge mansion had been remodeled into something of an experimental chamber. There was still a huge furnace and a somewhat smaller hot-water burner in the corner, but otherwise the room had been transfigured.

There were four persons in it now, one of them undoubtedly a companion of Remsdorf's from the previous night. The other was a stranger to George Pelgrim. He wore a white medical smock. He had a small black mustache and looked foreign. Remsdorf himself was lolling in a huge oversized steel tub, his shoulders and thick arms lumps of blue-white flesh.

And on the table at the far end of the room, her blond hair tumbling over its end, was Linda Mallory strapped to the steel surface.

Remsdorf was talking, apparently to Linda, although the girl gave little notice that she heard. She was lying on her back looking fixedly upward, and from her expression George suspected that she was either in a deeply shocked condition or under some form of sedation. The white-coated, mustached figure hovered around her, and even as the reporter looked, he fixed a tourniquet on her left forearm.

The Damp Man pulled himself laboriously out of the huge tub and stood nude except for a breechcloth around his middle while the one, evidently a doctor, made a small quick incision in his arm and nodded enthusiastically at the result. George's muscles stiffened as he heard a sob from Linda. She turned her head away from the scene about to unfold, and at that precise moment

Pelgrim felt something hard dig into his back and a voice said:

"You again, huh?"

He started to turn but the revolver jabbed deeper into his spine.

"None of that! March straight down."

It was the twin of the gunman below, the other one from last night—the one Pelgrim had seen earlier making the rounds of the house.

Remsdorf bellowed as the two came down the stairs. It was a bellow of triumph and amusement rather than rage.

"Your in time for a good show, Pelgrim. As your employer," his laughter rumbled wetly, ". . . I recommend it highly."

He directed his aids to tie George to a chair and waved away the accented little doctor who approached holding a hypodermic in one hand like a suggestion.

"Not yet. We want him to see what is going on. Time enough for him later."

REMSDORF postured before the reporter like a huge bloated pollywog.

"You're about to see my fondest dream consummated. You have been a stupid, and at times, unwitting obstacle but of course I have defeated you. Linda Mallory is mine as I willed she should be. Perhaps it is only right that you followed us here and will now see the final chapter. I do not know, Pelgrim, whether you believed me or not when I said that I and Miss Mallory were about to embark on a great biological experiment. It is entirely true. We shall raise a new race of humans. A far more indestructible race, capable of powers and talents beyond the human ken. I, myself, am different, Pelgrim, as you know.

"I hope and believe it will be possible to make my difference Linda Mallory's difference, and then . . ." he shrugged his shoulders, ". . . a race of us which will eventually rule the world!

"The first prerequisite, though," he explained elaborately, "is to drain her veins, her organs and her entire body of blood, which our present-day unimaginative scientists believe is essential to life. Instead, she will receive a transfusion of life fluid from me and she and I will become one.

"It is not necessary; in fact, it would be useless to explain the scientific and medical factors involved here. Suffice it that you will be watching the world's greatest biological experiment, Pelgrim. It's entirely fitting that the last event of your life before, shall we say, your demise, should be of such momentous caliber."

He motioned to the doctor, "You may proceed."

THE white-coated man moved swiftly to Linda's side and inspected the tourniquet on her forearm again. Linda struggled and tried desperately to turn her head far enough to look at George, but the thongs holding her were too cruelly tight. Remsdorf seated himself on a bench at the girl's side and the doctor applied a tourniquet to his arm also. He then bent to a table and came up with a small shining knife and a length of rubber tubing with large needles affixed to both ends.

He turned towards Linda's arm, and at his movement, George with a tremendous effort threshed mightily and toppled his chair over. In an instant the two sallow gunmen were upon him, guns raised but Remsdorf's sharp orders caused them only to right Pelgrim's chair.

"I want him to see this!" Remsdorf rumbled.

The doctor, distracted by the sound, bent again to his work. George watched fascinatedly as the needle neared Linda's forearm vein. The reporter was watching so closely, straining so tensely that when he thought about it afterward, the following sequence of events seemed somewhat muddled.

At any rate, the gaping blue hole in the white-coated technician's head seemed to appear before the thunderous crash of sound came from the stairs. Actually, the two must have occurred simultaneously and the doctor sank soundlessly to the floor. One of the gunmen clawed wildly at his own pocket and an explosive roar greeted his action. The other aid hurled himself at the stairs only to be caught in mid-air by an impact that sent him reeling and kicking to the ground.

Only then did Pelgrim turn his head away from the carnage, the three dead lying there. What he saw was the oldest, strangest man holding the biggest revolver he'd ever seen. As he stepped down the stairs and came into

the basement room, he seemed to grow smaller. He was bowed slightly, and a mane of white hair came a quarter ways down his back.

There'd been horror enough in that room, yet the greatest of all was on Lother Remsdorf Junior's face as he stared past Pelgrim at the tiny advancing figure.

"Father!"

The words hissed out and the Damp Man rose, trembling in every fleshy part.

"Yes," the little man admitted, and he advanced silently on his monster son, his eyes as he passed Pelgrim a blazing blue fury not of this world.

George was struggling furiously to work himself free from the chair and had already managed to loosen one wrist. Linda lay rigid with terror. Meanwhile the struggle of wills between the two men before him continued.

"You're dead!" wheezed the fat man, backing away. "You're dead! I know you are because I . . ."

"Because you arranged for my death! Ah, but you, my son, you are not dead and that is something which must be righted. I created you out of the brine, out of the molecule, and out of the protoplasm. And where other men return to dust, you will return to your medium!"

He motioned Remsdorf towards the steel tub, and hypnotically the giant man obeyed, easing himself into the water while all the time his horror-dilated eyes were unable to leave the old man's face.

Pelgrim was almost free now. One leg was loosening too.

THE old man went on. "You are in your coffin, your grave and your tomb, Lother Remsdorf, Junior. You shall be unable to return to this life."

The Damp Man was as though paralyzed in the huge steel tub of water. Only his eyes showed movement as he followed the old man's backward steps. The gun was out of the ancient's hand now. He stopped in front of the huge hot-water furnace. He took a pail and a shovel and opened the door. He heaped the pail full of live red coals and then he stalked towards where his son waited for him, unmoving with the hypnotic terror that froze him in his watery vat.

"No!" shouted Pelgrim with a scream that forced the words from his lips, but the old man paid no attention.

The reporter's thoughts were for Linda, and he flung himself towards her covering her face and her ears as best he could. Even as he did, the old man emptied the live pan of flaming coals into the tub.

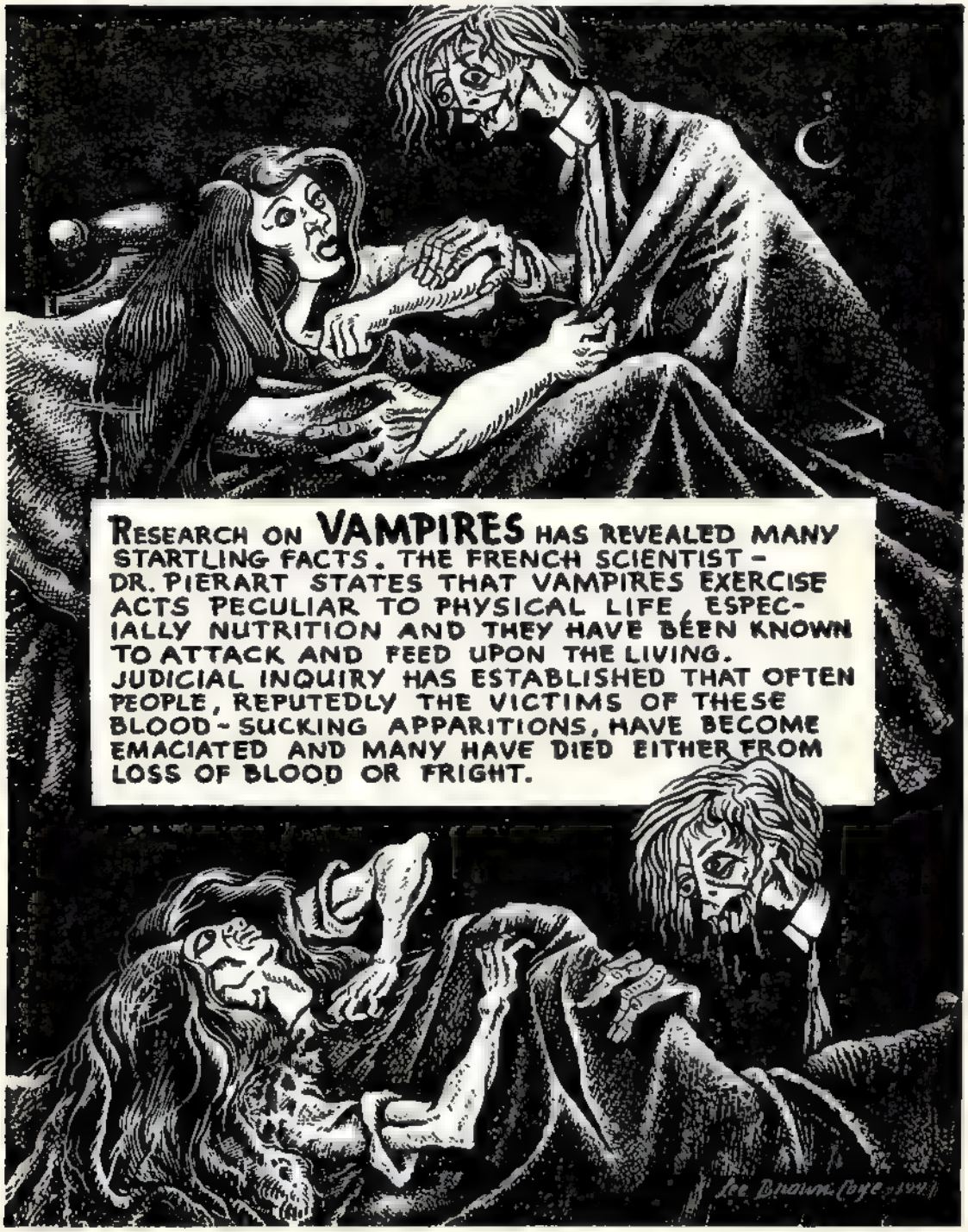
The water began to boil but the screams of agony which Pelgrim expected were not forthcoming. Instead, the Damp Man's face grew less and then liquidated. His giant limbs and torso seemed to take up the gurgling boiling of the water, until, as though in imitation, the all of him curled and heaved and boiled and bubbled too, and then, entirely magically and impossible because Pelgrim had been watching every instant, there was nothing in the tub but the roil of still-boiling water, and in the bottom showing from under the now darkened coals, the breechcloth lying slack as a towel!

The old man was gone up the stairs and into the night from whence he'd come. And Linda, thankfully, was sobbing in George's arms, while he desperately thought up some tale to comfort her and to explain the disappearance of the evil being, Lother Remsdorf Jr., a man who had perhaps never quite been and who was now only a vanishing mist of steam around the dome light of the room and beaded droplets against the high windows looking out to sea.

WEIRDISMS

Vampires

Drawings — Lee Brown Coye
Legend — E. Crosby Michel



MUCH OF THE LORE OF **VAMPIRISM** HAS BEEN ATTRIBUTED TO SUPERSTITION AND HYSTERIA. HOWEVER BODIES OF SUSPECTED VAMPIRES HAVE BEEN EXHUMED AND FOUND FULL OF FRESH BLOOD WITH FRESH MUD ON THEIR FEET, WHICH WOULD SEEM TO BE EVIDENCE OF THE ACTUALITY OF THE BLOOD-THIRSTY FORAGING OF THESE EVIL SPIRITS. THESE INVESTIGATIONS HAVE ALSO REVEALED THE TRAGEDY OF GOOD SPIRITS STILL UNRELEASED AT THE TIME OF BURIAL. THESE HAVE WRITHED AND TWISTED IN AGONY TO DETACH THEMSELVES FROM THE MATERIAL BODY RATHER THAN REMAIN AND BECOME VAMPIRES.

The House of Cards

BY MALCOLM M. FERGUSON

An odd chronicle of a ghastly old house and an evil pack of tarot cards that dealt destiny

"NOW this Madame Jumel was a dark lady—or at least she aspired to be—from the moment she cast off the name of Alice Lemming and appropriated the name once held by a friend of Aaron Burr," thus Thomas Chadwick began the evening's discussion.

We had just put in a strenuous day packing Old Man Parmelee down from Hansen Mountain after he had spent the night in the woods up there with a broken leg, and I was glad to stay overnight with Chadwick,

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

the Englishman, whose newly-acquired ark of a house was plunged in the woods on the old, disused road over Tumble-Down-Dick.

So with considerable relief at a search-and-rescue job well done, and the veteran woodsman Parmelee restored to safety, I could turn my attention with interest to the facts that were agitating the mind of my friend, and the hot rum toddy he provided.

"She owned this house, you know, and for a while in the 1880s and '90s took in boarders. She liked the pretense of being a woman of mystery, dealt in clairvoyance, ectoplasmic emanations, and all that. I don't think she fully realized her opportunities however; surely this ghastly old house alone —or that pack of tarot-cards on the table— should be enough, in the hands of a capable spook-artist to give her the prestige she desired."

Chadwick was right. The old house was a monstrosity which would take a lot of altering. It had been built in the 1850s when dark brown stain was in vogue for the woodwork, and hundreds of board feet of fretwork had supplanted the honest, simple lines of earlier craftsmanship. Undoubtedly the shades had been drawn to protect the parlor furniture from fading, and antimacassars, cluttered corner whatnots, and decorated kerosene lamps, under the guise of good taste overcrowded the room, making one feel shut in and ill at ease, creating an aprehension which is part of that insidious, intangible feeling, our sometime fear of old houses.

"Yes, I've seen pictures of the old gal," I ventured. "She had soot-black hair drawn back sharply in a way that didn't do her features justice. And it's also true that her features would have appeared to better advantage if she had known how to smile, and not kept her lips in a thin line. Those black dresses of hers were certainly severe, too. But didn't a rumpus about death and insanity go along with her?"

"Right on the noggin, old boy," said Chadwick gleefully, making his knuckles crack by way of being excited. "These two folio volumes have been giving me a good deal on the matter."

He held up two bound notebooks stuffed with papers and dust-begrimed.

"I was lightening up this front parlor woodwork when I noticed that the bottom shelf of the corner cupboard lifts out," he explained.

"Lord, what a find. Does this make her out to have been a murderer?"

"Well, yes and no. Let's reconstruct the whole affair with now and then a bit of help from these volumes. Then we can judge better."

In the spring of 1882, when she fell heir to this place, the Tumble-Down-Dick road was used quite a lot more than it is now, even if the railroad from Boston was already drawing traffic around by Tavistock. For two years she lived here by herself, wrapped in her exclusive interests and sheltered by the funereal spruce trees that flanked the south and east faces of the house. In 1884 came financial troubles, brought on by the New York bank failings, apparently. She must have been hard hit, because in less than a year she was planning to take in boarders. Yes, boarders, profaning the temple of her house, laughing at her behind her back, running the curtains 'way up, disarraying the antimacassars, pulling her back from the spirit world to get coffee or toast, occupying the bathroom, and lounging about in her parlor. The unhappiness of reduced circumstances cast a pall of gloom about this dark lady, Mme. Jumel.

IN SPITE of her somber mien, exacting habits, burnt toast and cold coffee, and above all in spite of the house itself, boarders came. The west room with its view of the White Mountains was more expensive, whereas the east room, over this room—her front parlor—was hemmed in by the trees, now providently gone. The upstairs bedroom must have been cold and moist and uninviting, bearing in itself all that was wrong, all that was outcast-of-soul about boarding houses. With the snuffing of the oil lamp the roomer was engulfed by the darkness of a raven's wing, an ominous atmosphere with an implicit "Nevermore," or a Wotan's warning of a black doom due; a heaviness which seemed to be awaiting that horrible apparition known in the language of my Scotch schoolmaster as "the Boneless."

One fall evening Mme. Jumel fetched a French-Canadian crone from Tavistock

up to witness some spiritualistic manifestations. Tante Marie was the best audience Mme. Jumel could get sometimes, though she often proved disappointing to her hostess. Mme. Jumel might perform at a séance with the distraught airs of Lady Macbeth, to find afterwards that her guest was quite unruffled.

"These are just spirit," she would nod, "I see them often. They tell me their troubles. Yes, yes. But what is that book with the black shadow over it?"

Mme. Jumel's diary would splutter at this, calling Tante Marie a "superstitious old fool," "illiterate and unappreciative," and much more in the same vein. True enough, Tante Marie did not have much book-learning, but what she had learned from was folk-lore, instinct, and word-of-mouth. What puzzled and vexed Mme. Jumel particularly was Tante Marie's belief that a book, a house, or some other inanimate object could be a sinister talisman—more than that even, a potent force in itself. Here, let me read you a passage from her diary about this Tante Marie—

"Rode down today and picked up Tante Marie in Frenchtown. She had heard that I had a pack of tarot-cards at the house and wanted to see them. I told her how I had bought them from a bookshop in Riversmouth just after a sailor had brought them in.

" 'Stole them from a gypsy, hein?'

" 'Well, maybe. They're real old—16th century probably, and have twenty-two symbols of "atouts" besides fifty-six other cards more or less like ours.'

"During the ride I couldn't seem to interest Tante Marie in my ouija board contact at all. The cards were all that interested her. When we arrived at the house, however, she became quite uneasy.

" 'It's full,' she said. 'I couldn't imagine what she meant. The house. It's full. You had better not practice tonight or any more here. Bad, bad luck, death, blood. Too long you have practice here already. Full—like sparks in a cat's fur. Soon it will be stronger than you.'

"With her hawk's face, beady eyes and sharp, cackling voice Tante Marie set me on edge tonight. Finally I persuaded her to stay long enough to see the cards, whose mere physical form conveyed a dark force to the old woman. The only boarder, Horace Tolliver, seemed to be interested in them also, and folded his newspaper as I brought them to the parlor table. He apparently came into some money somewhere along the line, but it doesn't seem to give him much pleasure now. He just seems to wander around like someone extra, like the joker in a deck of cards maybe, separate and different.

"The three of us examined the cards, looking especially at the 'atouts' or symbols —Death, Temperance, The Hermit, Pope Joan, Le Pendu (a dead man hanged by one leg, and in chains)—twenty-two in all. Tante Marie examined them all with misgivings at the portents she saw in them.

" 'Choose the card of your destiny,' I offered.

" 'No,' she replied, 'not yet I guess. Besides, I don't like the feel of this house. No, it would choose, not me. That would be no good.'

"Mr. Tolliver could not keep his curiosity back, and said, 'Choose one for me then, and tell me what it means.'

"She gave him a sharp look, an examination with her eyes slitted. Knowing her I suspected she didn't like something she saw in him. 'Many time it is better not to know. But you do not believe, so choose if you like.'

"With a convulsive move she thrust the deck toward him. He shuffled and drew—the Wheel of Fortune.

" 'Ha,' said Tante Marie, 'you figure this one yourself. Didn't it turn once for you? It will turn once more against you.'

"Mr. Tolliver wilted at this turn of affairs, and mumbled his thanks for the fortune-telling. Shortly afterward he went up to bed. I rebuked Tante Marie for her bluntness.

" 'But Mme. Jumel, the card does not lie. And I cannot hide fate.'

"After that I couldn't interest Tante Marie in a spiritual manifestation. She was too engrossed with Mr. Tolliver and the card he drew, or as she insisted 'the house drew for him.' So I drove her back earlier than usual."

Chadwick closed the book and explained that the room over the parlor in which

we sat was the room to which Mr. Horace Tolliver had retired, the room flanked with spruce trees, its darkness having a dense atmosphere enfolding one like the black fluid some sea-creatures exude. With its brown-stained rococo woodwork, its overstuffed furniture, and its ponderous oak bed with a canopy it gave one the shut-in feeling of the claustrophobe, as if the air were denser, darker, a malevolent, sentient thing in itself.

It was about three in the morning when two shots rang through that chamber. Madame Jumel, in bathrobe, thrust at the door, and finally, in desperation fetched an axe and, swinging wildly, battered down the door. In the room a flickering oil lamp revealed Mr. Horace Tolliver sprawled on the floor with a bullet through his temple.

The scene Chadwick described was immediate to me, being directly overhead. A lamp—possibly the same one—was our only source of light, and I needed only to take it in hand and climb the stairs to see the room as it was when the body was found. Chadwick's interior decorating had not yet reached the second floor.

THE suicide left a note, a hasty, distracted scrawl that sheds all the light on the crime that we need. But what possessed Mme. Jumel to put this note in her diary instead of surrendering it to the authorities who were soon on the scene? Perhaps her character suggests an answer. The fascination of this all-revealing note was too great for her. At the expense of little or no incrimination to herself—for it was obviously a suicide—she could hold the key to the crying mystery of why.

Silently Chadwick handed me the loose sheets from the diary.

"Will it not end? This house, this room, this bed,—that Canuck witch-woman, what madness. Is there no peace after all these years?

"Never before has it been so bad, but now the whole crime is before me, around me. I came up to bed with that Wheel of Fortune on my mind, haunted by the fact that a wheel is round, and so is a well, and that my fortune began with a well. I was Miss Emily's handyman then—twenty years ago—a young fool covetous of her riches. Wasn't money all I needed to make Jeanette my wife? Doubly a fool for that—

"But tonight there is no sleep. In the deep dark of this room—dark enough to make one pale—lying in bed a fearful sensation overcame me. I was spinning backwards and inwards down a long spiral darkness. I opened my eyes and sat up. I was sure the utterly black room was going round me. Had I eaten or drunk immoderately—surely not. Never since my crime had I taken a drink—I haven't dared.

" 'Good God,' I exclaimed softly, and the sound echoed back—I swear it—a mocking hollow horror that could only have come from the depths of a well!

"Then all sensation of being in bed left me, and I felt myself bruised and numb, but strangely dry, in the bottom of a well. I reached out—sand, cobwebs, cold rock. At last a glimmer of light, a faint trace only. My hands gripped into the sand in spite of me. I was looking up from the dry bottom of a well, up the rough stones, to the top. And the supreme horror there, leaning over and obscuring the light of day was the old lady, Miss Emily. Wet and dead! Just as she was when her body was hauled out.

"I closed my eyes and thrust my hands before them. Could I not shut out this vision? I dared not stir and feel the sand, the cold stone. Slowly a spider crawled up my back, threading beads of sweat on the web it trailed.

"And then a voice—not from a well, but from the outside, the unrestricted open air—remote, far off: 'Did you win your girl with my money, Horace Tolliver?'

"Why did I cry 'No, no'? Was it to hear my own voice echo back emptily down the round well-side?

" 'Have my worldly goods brought you happiness, Horace Tolliver?'

"My sobs echoed back. I could not contain them.

" 'Answer me.'

" 'No, no, never.'

"What horrors this night brings—forming, reforming, mocking.

" 'Miss Emily,' said I, 'Today I'm going to fix your well—clean it and stone it up.'

" 'It's about time,' she said.

" 'Come out and show me how you think it should be.'

"And then I was holding her a-tilt over the coping by her scrawny black-stockinged ankles and she was pleading for her life. Most of her money was in her mattress and it would be mine, she squealed.

" 'It will indeed,' I grated.

"She howled as she plunged head-first to splash in the waters below. Then silence and darkness, until at last the crazily twisted figure broke the waters.

"How did I get the bedroom floor under my feet, or find a match, or light this lamp? What is forcing me to write? I can see my pistol by my left hand. In a moment I will clutch it and turn around. I know that Miss Emily will be standing there. I know it. . . ."

AS I PUT down the paper Chadwick remarked that Miss Emily must indeed have been waiting, since Tolliver's first bullet was imbedded in the wainscot where he had turned and fired it. I could see for myself, if I chose, where the mark was.

As you can imagine, Chadwick assured me, Mme. Jumel walked on eggs for a while after Tolliver's death. Her views didn't seem to approach Tante Marie's appreciably, however, and her rationale of the Tolliver death was long and involved, with spiritualistic abracadabra, influences of the zodiac, and much more in her cluttered diary. She did manage to get the big oak bed moved out of the room and an iron bed put in its place; not a radical improvement, but a step in the right direction.

Mme. Jumel's business was quite brisk following the suicide. The notoriety seems to have helped rather than hindered. It was undoubtedly notoriety that brought flashy Milton Digby to the Maison Jumel. Digby looked more like a gambler than a banker, but could this be a rebuke to our too-ready observations? That he was young, dapper, and a man of leisure with no tangible evidence of a bank's problems touching him at all, was more apparent.

Mme. Jumel described him as a jaunty man with a wide, toothy smile, and suspected that Milton Digby was becoming enamored of her. The one other boarder, a deaf old lady, came in handy as a foil, Mme. Jumel gleefully recalled in her diary. Whether all this was in the old girl's imagination, whether Digby was really smitten, or whether he had an ulterior motive was not then evident. But this was only the third day of his stay, and one paid by the week, so even the color of his money was hidden.

Tante Marie had come to the house several times since the suicide. The old woman had watched with polite patience a séance of Mme. Jumel's, never really put out by the spirits that appeared, as if she were quite familiar—even bored, perhaps—with the whole crew. Mme. Jumel would be annoyed at this for a while, until her mounting desire for an audience outweighed her annoyance, and Les Tompkins, who helped out around, hitched up Bessie, and once again she would fetch Tante Marie.

This evening Tante Marie wanted to examine the tarot-cards again, her fascination with Mme. Jumel's strange books having been worn out in earlier visits. So, with some diffidence Mme. Jumel produced them. Their undeniable fascination was more than an excuse to bring Milton Digby to the spot. Neither woman gave any evidence of desiring his presence, or hearing his remarks as Tante Marie examined the cards: the Chariot, L'Amoreux, Pope Joan, The Last Judgment, and all the rest.

What could have made Mme. Jumel ask him to take his choice? No sooner were the words out of her mouth than the back of her hand covered it. There were times when Mme. Jumel puzzled herself.

"I would be delighted to find fortune in your eyes," said Mr. Digby with alacrity.

Nothing for it but to fan out the fifty-six regular tarot-cards plus the twenty-two "atouts." Mr. Digby promptly selected a card—it was The Juggler.

"Hah! Le Bateleur," the crone cackled. "What accounts for this, Mr. Banker?"

"Why I—I—I must be the victim of fate's jugglery," he stammered lamely, looking at the card which gave him the lie, for on it appeared a Pierrot blandly accepting accolades for his jugglery well done.

A strange consternation had caught up with Digby, and there was nothing to do but withdraw and gather his forces. He had taken the room upstairs in which Tolliver had died. Judging from the long pause between the thud of the first shoe

and its mate overhead, Digby was thinking, harder than he would like to have it appear.

At about two in the morning Mme. Jumel awoke to hear screams and the sound of Digby thrashing violently.

"You can't take it back," he screamed, and the bed was shaken violently. "It's mine now. Don't think for a minute this cage is going to hold me. You—"

What was Mme. Jumel to do? Was this an ordinary nightmare? If so, how could she deal with it?

"Drop that, Stevens. Drop it I say. If you don't I'll break open a bank scandal that'll make headlines up and down the West Coast! It's mine—mine—every cent of it," and he began sobbing and shaking the bed again.

"Mr. Digby. Do you hear me? Mr. Digby. Are you all right? Nothing's going to hurt you. You're safe, among friends," Mme. Jumel called, rattling the doorknob with both hands as her boarder became wilder, more distraught. Surely he could no longer be dragged by a nightmare. Suppose he were awake?—and she fell to shaking the doorknob again.

There was a moment's silence, then the voice began again in a lower register: "Twenty-five thousand dollars and all mine. A little lesson in 'honesty doesn't pay,' Mr. Stevens. Nice of you to lend me the money. I've been in that teller's cage long enough. There's more money in being silent than being a teller, eh, Mr. Bank-President Stevens, hah, hah, hah, hah, ha. . . ." His laughter became madder by the minute.

This had been going on for nearly an hour when Mme. Jumel dressed and went for help.

AT FIVE o'clock two husky neighbors burst in the bedroom door and found Digby, unconscious, gripping the iron bars at the foot of his bed. Pale, dishevelled and in a cold sweat, he was taken off to the hospital, strapped in a blanket lest he become violent.

At the hospital where he remained delirious, an effort was made to find his next of kin. With clues from his belongings and from his insane gibberings, it was soon established that ten years previous he had been a bank-teller in San Francisco who had fled after the suicide of the bank president. The suicide note of the president, Mr. Stevens, confessed embezzlement and named Digby as a blackmailer.

Barely enough money was found among Digby's belongings to pay for a week's board. He never recovered his sanity.

Chadwick anticipated my question. No, Mme. Jumel had not found any money among Digby's possessions, he felt, citing her diary's frank acknowledgment of a vain search. No, the money had probably ebbed away like sand in a glass, leaving Digby desperately hard up and a fugitive as well.

For a while Mme. Jumel closed off her ill-fated bedroom, dropped Tante Marie from her friendship, and limited her spiritualistic explorations. She even intended to dispose of the tarot-cards, but this was too much.

Gradually she recovered her equanimity, however, and soon the room was opened again, and in it slept Mr. A. Maurice Shumway, a retired realtor.

But at least it cannot be said that Mme. Jumel didn't warn him of the room's past.

Mr. Shumway had the mouth of a guppy, making silent o's all the while Mme. Jumel spoke. Before she had ended, indeed, he was off:

"Yes, Mme. Jumel, I understand, I understand perfectly; after my own bereavement I cannot help but understand how these matters affect one. My wife, Mme. Jumel, was lost to me just four years ago in such a terrible manner that it has left me sensitive to all such misfortunes. Poor dear Elsie was burned to death at our cottage on Square Lake."

One wouldn't have to be as self-centered as Mme. Jumel was to look askance at this stout, bald man, who burdened you with his sad story before the ink had dried on the guest book; no, anyone might fear lest these doleful details be told and retold until the last bill was paid. Nevertheless, painful though this story might become in repetition, Mme. Jumel would listen eagerly to the first telling since for her the slow pace of the funeral hack had all the fascination of the fast pace of the fire-horses.

"We were up at the camp late in the fall that year. One Monday I got up early to walk to the station and take the train back

to Boston. Less than eight hours after I had left Larchboro Crossing I received word at my office that our cottage had burned and Elsie in it.

"Naturally I hastened to Square Lake as quickly as I could. The terrible news was true, however. Nothing remained of our cottage but the big stone chimney. Elsie had died before the Larchboro fire apparatus had even been hitched up. It was horrible."

Mme. Jumel expressed her sympathy, but was soon off to open the room and prepare it for occupancy.

The first three nights of Mr. Shumway's occupancy were uneventful, though he complained of sleeping poorly and of the room's stuffiness. But since he complained of everything else, with whinings and peevishness, all the while feeding himself on nerve pills, Mme. Jumel didn't set much store by his more justifiable complaints.

On the fourth day Mme. Jumel came into her parlor suddenly to find Mr. Shumway examining her tarot-cards. He looked up with a startled, rabbity expression.

"Really, Mr. Shumway, I wish—"

"Oh, dear, I hope you don't mind, Mme. Jumel," he expostulated, "I'm simply fascinated with these old cards."

"You shouldn't get into my personal property, Mr. Shumway. You know that."

He overlooked her remark completely.

"I just chose a card, and really, I don't know whether it's good or bad. It's The Sun. Tell me, please, is that good, Mme. Jumel?"

"I couldn't tell you. Put those cards back where they belong."

"Oh, very well. The Sun does sound like a nice card, even if I've been terribly afraid of fire ever since my wife died. It was so horrible."

This association of ideas between the fate of Shumway's wife and this card did not seem close to Mme. Jumel. Could she have missed some important point of association that was in Shumway's mind, or did he always excite himself with far-fetched associations surrounding his wife's death?

THAT evening Shumway was quieter than usual, and retired early. Later that night Mme. Jumel awoke to hear once again noises from that fatal room. Shumway was coughing in a peculiar, half-choked fashion. Mme. Jumel stirred angrily in her bed, and finally settled to listen to the latest boarder's discomfort. It was then that she heard Mr. Shumway's voice between coughs—a voice turned to a bleat with deathly fear.

She arose and went to the battered, patched door of the guest chamber. First came a bout of coughs, then—

"Oh God—cough—smoke—cough."

Then there was a long pause, as the coughing died away. Mme. Jumel was about to go back to bed when the voice of Shumway came again, abruptly, tensely.

"Elsie—what are you doing?—why can't I move? Listen to me, Elsie, dear. You shouldn't tie me up like this, even for a joke. . . . For the love of God, what are you pouring on my mattress? . . . Kerosene! And that burning glass and those matches. What does it all mean? Come back, Elsie, come back—I'll never—Elsie!"

Then he was silent. Mme. Jumel listened, but nothing more could be heard. She went back to her room, to turn over in her mind this strange nightmare that troubled her boarder. Finally she fell asleep.

The next forenoon Shumway did not appear. There were two other boarders, both older women who had heard Shumway but didn't trouble themselves in the matter. Shortly after noon Mme. Jumel's anxiety became apparent. After calling a number of times at Shumway's door, she asked a young man who was fishing nearby and Tompkins, the neighbor who helped with the heavy work, to open the door. They quickly cracked open a panel and turned the key in the lock.

Shumway lay stiffly in bed, with the front of his nightgown torn open. He was dead. His hands were convulsed about his bare throat.

Doctor Sproule came, and hazarded the belief that death was due to a heart attack. The case puzzled him, however, and Mme. Jumel heard—or thought she heard—him mutter something about "symptomata of asphyxiation to be looked into."

This third misfortune was too much for the boarders, curious or otherwise, and Mme. Jumel was soon forced to suspend

her activities. Suspicions had been aroused, either by the doctor's indiscreet admission of strange misgivings, or by the two old ladies who "would not spend another night in that terrible house." They whispered of having heard Mme. Jumel tiptoe to Shumway's door the night he died—was killed, they said. Since Mme. Jumel had not been officially questioned on that subject, nor ventured to say she had been attracted to listen at Shumway's door, this sounded strongly against her in the old ladies' whisperings. Much more was spoken, libelous and nearly so, hinting that Mme. Jumel had engineered these misfortunes. Some thought for money, some thought out of an obsession. Only Tante Marie spoke out against this opinion. To her it was all brought about by that infernal house and by those diabolical cards. That was the way she saw it.

MME. JUMEL'S diary does condemn her on one point, however. Here is the quotation:

"All yesterday morning a ghastly suspicion was working in my mind that Mr. Shumway would be found dead. But I would have to wait before having the room opened. Not one word did I say of what I had heard him utter in the night; only that from my room I had heard him having a nightmare. At last the hour became sufficiently late for me to show alarm."

Then Mme. Jumel goes on to tell of the discovery—but listen to this:

"As soon as Tompkins left to fetch Dr. Sproule I went into the room, ostensibly to cover the body, but instead I went straight to Shumway's luggage. In the bottom of his black bag I found four bundles of bills. Hastily I transferred them to an old shawl. Where could I hide them? The old stove-flue, of course. Hastily I pulled off the metal cover, crammed the shawl and its contents onto the narrow brick ledge, and replaced the cover."

And then, when the house was empty of guests, Mme. Jumel retrieved the bills. Nearly four thousand dollars she had. No longer would she be troubled with boarders; now she could live as she wished.

At least that is what she thought. But with her boarders gone there came to her a loneliness. She prowled about the house restlessly. Spiritualism seemed to her a mockery now. She wrote in her diary of all this, and of her desire to be rid of the tarot-cards. She would burn them in fact.

But nothing came of it, until one night in midwinter she got out the tarot-cards for the last time. With them before her she renewed her resolution to destroy them, her pen fairly digging the pages of her diary in her determination. Again she wavered, and succumbed to a strange temptation. How did it come about; what quirk of the gambler's mind caused her to draw a card?

At any rate, draw one she did. For later, when she was found dead in a snowdrift well down the unplowed road to Tavistock, crumpled in her frozen hand was a tarot-card, the House of Destruction.

Chadwick turned to look at me, enigmatically. "Well, my friend, the hour is late. Would you rather sleep upstairs or down?"

Eena

By MANLY BANISTER

THE SHE-WOLF was silhouetted sharply against the moon-gilded waters of Wolf Lake. Silent as Death in the cover of a rotting log, Joel Cameron sighted along a dully gleaming rifle barrel. He squeezed the trigger.

The gray-tipped wolf leaped high, cavorted grotesquely in midair. The beast threshed in short-lived agony upon the ground and lay still. Joel ejected the cartridge from the smoking chamber.

"Five bucks, and all profit!" he grunted, anticipating the State bounty.

In the act of legging over the log, he stopped and swiftly raised his weapon. His attention had been so intent upon the she-wolf as she slunk from the forest edge, he had not noticed the whelp that followed her. Terrified, the whimpering wolf cub galloped toward the safety of the woods. Joel dropped his rifle and sprinted.

"I'll be darned!" he panted, scooping the wolfling up into his arms. "An albino whelp!"

In this manner, Eena the she-wolfling was introduced to the world and the ways of men.

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

Truly, a wolf-girl has the emotions and instincts of two worlds

Joel's cabin was a mile down the lakeshore, hidden in a wooded draw that protected it from wind and weather, and separated from the edge of the lake by a thin screen of timber.

Joel Cameron had been born and raised in the high pine woods. Later fortune, through the medium of a battered typewriter and a skillful ability to weave a fanciful yarn, had led him to life in the city. But each Spring he returned to the cabin he had built in the hills and stayed there until the crispness of early Autumn presaged the coming of snow.

It was an ideal life, one to which Joel's temperament was ideally suited. When editorial favor inclined to the lean side, which it often did, he could depend upon the cabin in the mountains for refuge from the palsied palms of greedy landlords. The state wolf-bounty kept the figurative wolf from his door by inviting the literal one within.

Eena proved to be different from the usual wolfkind. Joel recognized this from the first. Even her albinoism was different. She lacked the red eyes usually associated with the lack of pigmentation. They were gray-hazel, and they gave Joel a weird sense of being somehow human. They were distinctly out of place in the snow-white, lupine visage of the wolflet.

Eena grew rapidly and prodigiously. At one time or another, every homesteader in the valley below passed by to see the albino. Some admired her look of intelligence, the growing strength of her. Some deplored the fact that a wolf so handy for killing should be allowed to live.

Pierre Lebrut, a trapper who had a tumble-down cabin a mile away, rubbed his palms on his greasy overalls and spat toward the caged wolf.

"Cameroon," said he, "I catch her, I keel her, you bet!" He scowled at the white wolf, and Eena's hackles raised in response. "She bad one, all right," Pierre growled. "She breeng bad luck. You see!"

THE man went away, and Joel crouched by the chicken-wire fence of Eena's pen. He had got into the practice of talking softly to the animal.

"Kill you? Not you, my beauty!" He chuckled fondly. The half-grown wolf cocked her head at him and stared with unblinking, gray-hazel eyes.

"Sometimes I wonder if you'd let me scratch your ears?" He smiled through the fence. Eena lolled her tongue with a friendly grin. "On the other hand," Joel told her, "I need both my hands to type with! You're an independent she-cuss. Maybe that's why I like you!"

Eena furnished Joel with material for several stories that went over well. As the Summer drifted somnolently past, he regarded her with increasing fondness. By the time Fall came around, Joel considered himself on friendly terms with the wolf, though he never dared venture close enough to touch her.

BY this time, too, the curiosity of the countryside was more or less satiated in regard to the albino wolf, and the traffic of visitors had long since returned to normal ....one every two weeks.

Pete Martin worked the first homestead on the country road that led to Valley Junction. Pete Martin was the valley's pride as a wolf hunter.

"Sent three sons an' a daughter through college on wolf-hides!" he often asserted, referring to the monthly bounty-checks from the State.

"I'll give you fifty bucks fer that wolf-bitch," Pete told Joel. "You'll be winterin' in the city pretty soon, an' you can't take the hellion with you. I want to cross her with some o' my best dogs an' raise me a breed o' good wolf-hunters."

Eena, six months old now and as big as a grown wolf, snoozed in the shade of the kennel Joel had built for her. Joel frowned.

"If I could think of some way to keep her," he told the homesteader, "I'd never part with her. Under the circumstances, I'll take your offer. I'll be driving to the city within three days. I'll bring her by then."

The two men shook hands solemnly on the agreement.

That night, Eena burrowed under the chicken wire fence of her enclosure. Like a silent wraith, she disappeared into the trackless wilds of the pine forest.

Joel drove his battered coupe back to the city, fifty dollars poorer than he might have been.

October winds rustled the waters of Wolf Lake. Deciduous trees turned red and gold and brown. The foothills blazed with Nature's paintpot.

November skies were leaden. The frost giants awakened in the earth. Snow smothered the valley and the hills. Existence in the wild turned bleak and harrowing. On silent pads the wolfpack stole into the haunts of men. They followed the lead of a great, white she-wolf, the largest and most cunning wolf ever seen.

The wolves swept down from the hills and lurked in the swirling skirts of the blizzard to strike and kill. They took a costly toll from the livestock that pastured in the valley. The homesteaders cursed the white she-leader of the pack. Joel Cameron's name was anathema on every tongue.

Eena was a year old the following spring. The handful of wolfling Joel Cameron had carried to his cabin a year before was now twice the size of the largest, sturdiest male in her pack. It was to this, and to her wise cunning, that she owed her leadership.

Eena regarded the black wolves lolling around her in the warm sun. These were her kind, yet not her kind. She knew she was different in more ways than size and the color of her pelt. For weeks she had felt a restlessness stirring inside her, an inexplicable thrilling of unknown significance.

Across the lake which glittered like a turquoise jewel in its setting of forest emerald, the sun sparkled upon the snowy mantilla of the mountain that thrust bare, stone shoulders up from a clinging bodice of pine woods.

Memory stirred the mind of the white she-wolf. She was thinking of a cabin hidden in a woodsy draw, hard by the waters of the lake. She remembered a clean-lined young face, a soothing voice that had spoken to her in pleasing, unintelligible syllables. She remembered kindness and something that amounted to friendship with a creature who was called man. Eena whimpered and got up.

The wolves rose with her and ringed around expectantly. A long moment Eena stood poised and silent, dwarfing the members of her pack. A thought, feeling . . . a command . . . went from her to them. The wolves sank back upon their haunches, tongues lolling. Eena turned and trotted alone into the forest.

The white wolf padded silently along sun-barred aisles of the forest. Her path led in an easy circle around the lake. Near sunset, she came unerringly upon the clearing occupied by Joel Cameron's cabin.

She crept into a thicket of elderberry trees and peered expectantly forth. Not toward the cabin, for that with the setting sun was at her back. Her questing glance winged across the darkening blue waters of the lake and fixed upon the glowing summit of the mountain.

Fascinated, Eena watched the fading beauty of it. The sky turned smoky-hued. A star or two glittered diamond-hard. A golden glow paled the sable sky beyond the shoulder of the mountain.

Crouched in the voiceless shadows, Eena held her breath and tingled with suspense. Instinct gave her thrilling warning. She was about to witness the essence of her difference from the wolfkind.

The moon came up full, a pumpkin-yellow disk, and rested its chin upon the mountain to ponder the scene thoughtfully before commencing its climb into the sky. . . . And Eena *changed*.

THE change shook her with ecstacy. Bubbling rapture accompanied the smooth flowing of supple muscles, the adjusting of bones in their sockets. An excitement of sensual pleasure engulfed every nerve and sinew. Afterward, she lay for long supine, one arm flung across her eyes to bar the eldritch glare of the moon, panting, trembling with remembered delight.

She sat up at last and thrilled to the shapely beauty of her form. Eena knew she was a woman, and she was content. She did not question how this had come about.

Eena crept down to the water's edge and surveyed her reflection in the dark surface of the lake. A faint breeze stirred the platinum tresses against round, golden shoulders. Her face was eager, full-lipped with flaring brows accenting her gray-hazel eyes. Her body was high of breast and long of leg, and the moonlight caressed her with a touch of mystery and magic.

The cabin was still, high-lighted and shadowed in the moon-brimming canyon.

Eena padded around it in a cautious circle. The air was dead, without scent. The man with the kind face and soothing voice was not here.

Puzzled and hurt, Eena turned away. She swam a while in the icy waters of the lake, revelling in the tonic effect of the chill.

Later, she roamed aimlessly, enjoying the easy response of her nerves and muscles. Once, her keen wolf-sense detected a rabbit quaking in a patch of brush. She started it up. As the frightened animal ran out, she sprinted swiftly and seized it in her hands. The rabbit uttered a thin, terrorized shriek, and died.

Eena sank her teeth in the rabbit's throat and exulted to the gushing warmth of blood. She sat down upon the needled turf, methodically tore the animal to pieces and ate it.

From time to time in her wandering, Eena responded to her woman's nature and crept down to the lake to admire her reflection.

The night was short . . . too short. Eena's aimless peregrination brought her just before dawn to another cabin. Pierre Lebrut lived here. Eena's sensitive nose caught the trapper's reek strong upon the air. A sluggish memory stirred in her brain. Eena snarled without sound and retreated with the prickling of invisible hackles stirring the length of her spine.

A twig snapped under Eena's foot. Steel piano-wire sang, and a bent sapling straightened with a rush. Eena was flung to earth, one foot jerked high in the wire noose of a snare. She threshed in wild panic, clawing and snapping wolf-fashion at the searing pain in her ankle.

Within the musty cabin, Lebrut sat up in his tumbled bunk.

"By gar, she sound like bear in dat trap!"

He slipped into heavy boots—he slept in his pants and undershirt—seized his rifle and hurried outside.

Gray dawn lighted the east, reflected palely into the forest. Lebrut saw the woman caught in his snare, laid down his rifle, and hurried to release her.

"Sacre nom d'un loup!" he muttered, slackening the wire to remove the noose from Eena's threshing ankle. "Lady, you pick fine time an' place for peecneec—an' w'at you do wit' no clo'es on?"

Pierre was excited and his voice shrill. The scent of him was overpowering in Eena's nostrils. She bit him savagely on the calf.

Pierre yelled in sudden fright. He fell heavily on the wolf-girl, and she snapped and clawed in renewed terror. The man grunted with anger and fought her, pinioned her arms.

"You wild one, *hein?*" Eena's body was closed, arched and quivering. Pierre grinned. "Maybe Pierre tame you wit' a kees, *hein?*"

The sun came up over the shoulder of the mountain and tinged the lake with blood. . . . And Eena *changed*.

It was no sensation of pleasure to return to the wolf. Eena felt the agony of the change in every muscle and nerve. She screamed with the horrid crunching and grinding of bones in her head, lengthening into the lupine muzzle. Albino fur sprouted like a million thorny barbs from her tender skin.

Pierre was still wide-eyed and frozen with horror when the fangs of the agonized wolf ripped the life from his terror-stricken body.

PETE MARTIN looked grim as he pried open the stiffened fingers of the dead trapper. The wind stirred a tuft of albino fur on the dead man's palm.

"Your albino bitch, Joel," the homesteader said.

Joel bit his lip.

"It's a devil of a thing for a man to come back to, Pete." He looked stolidly down at the dead man. "Poor Pierre! He died hard." Joel brought his glance up to meet the kindly stare of the homesteader. "I know the valley blames me for not killing Eena when she was a pup."

Martin shrugged. "It's too late now for blame, Joel. Maybe I'm to blame for not takin' her with me the day I offered to buy her. I dunno." He scratched his long jaw. "Well, we better see about gettin' Pierre properly planted, I guess."

Joel's expression was darkly stormy. "I feel responsible for the cattle . . . for Pierre." He wondered silently when and where the white wolf would kill again. He tongued dry lips. "I'll track her down and destroy her."

"There's a thousand dollars on her hide, Joel. Every homesteader in the valley chipped in."

"If I bring in her hide," Joel clipped, "it won't cost the homesteaders a cent!"

The homesteader's gray eyes lighted with a friendly gleam.

"Figured you'd look at it like that, Joel. I'll give you what help I can. . . ."

Joel spent the following month in the hinterland, returning to his cabin at intervals only to replenish supplies. The wolves were wary. He seldom came upon wolf-sign, and saw no wolves at all. But he heard them. By night their lonesome song rang eerily through the forest and echoed from the mountains.

Joel made final return to his cabin, and that night drove his coupé down a moonlit road to the Martin homestead.

"Reckoned you wouldn't find her," the homesteader acknowledged Joel's acquiescence to defeat. "She knows she's hunted an' will always manage to be some place else. She was here night before last with her pack an' got my prize heifer."

Joel made a gesture of despair. "You see what I'm up against? Besides, I'm behind in my work. I came up here to finish a book. The publisher is yelling his head off for it. How can I write a book and hunt wolves, too?"

The homesteader spat a fine stream of tobacco juice. "You go ahead an' write your book, son. You've made your try, an' 'twarn't your fault you failed. Some of us are gittin' together in the mornin'. We'll take to the wolf-trail an' stick it out till we git her!"

Joel's heart felt heavy. He still had a fond memory of the white she-wolf he had nursed from babyhood. He remembered her attitude of sage intelligence, her qualities that had made her seem almost human. Then he remembered she had turned killer, and he peered into the moon-shadows as he drove along the county road, half afraid he might spy her lurking there.

He turned down the indistinct ruts that led to his lakeside cabin, and another mile of bumpy going brought him home. The wobbling headlights swept across the cabin front, revealed an open door.

Joel suffered mild panic. Had a bear forced entry? He could imagine the shambles the animal had made of the interior. He sprang out and approached the house cautiously, rifle ready. Everything inside was in order. He lit the mantle of the kerosene lamp, went out and shut off the car lights and reentered the cabin.

Eena lay curled on a bearskin rug in front of the stone fireplace. Her platinum curls glistened silver contrast against the dull gold of her naked skin. She supported her chin with her hands and watched him with wide, wary eyes. A patch of full-moon brilliance, brighter than the lamplight, puddled the floor at her feet.

Joel stared. She was a dream come to life. The shock of seeing her there dismayed him.

"Who are you?" he essayed at last.

Eena stirred languidly. Her expression mimicked a wolfish grin. Hot blood surged into Joel's cheeks. He caught up a dressing gown and flung it to her.

"Put it on," he ordered.

Eena sobered, regarded the garment, and swung her level glance back to the man.

"Haven't you ever seen clothes before?" he asked sarcastically. He crossed over and adjusted the robe hastily about her shoulders. "Suppose one of the neighbors came by?"

The possibility was not likely, he knew. He said things simply to cover up his own shock and embarrassment. He sat down heavily in a leather club chair and stared at her. Eena stared back with friendly indifference.

Joel's mind boiled with fantastic questions. The girl remained silent. Only her eyes spoke, and their meaning was not quite clear to the beleaguered man.

He gave up trying to draw a word from her. Was she a deaf-mute? Who was she? Why was she here? He recalled stories he had heard of white savages; but those were found only in the wilds of the South American jungle, or in some hidden Shangri-La of Tibet. He tried to place her racial type, and was unsuccessful. There was something familiar about the shape and look of her eyes, but what it was eluded him.

He knew only that she was very beautiful, that he wanted her as he had never wanted another human being before. He could not know that Eena was not quite . . . human.

"I can't sit here all night, just looking at you," he said at last. He grinned with wry humor. "It's an idea, though, at that!" He stood up. "Lady, if you will consent to occupy the guest room tonight, the hotel can accommodate you."

Joel held out his hand to help her rise. Eena moved like a flash, shaking off the encumbering dressing gown. She paused at the door and smiled at him. The lamplight made molten gold of her body, a tawny silhouette against the moon-silvered outdoors.

Then she was gone, like a wolf goes, on swift, silent pads.

And with her, the warmth went from the cabin. Joel felt a chill, followed by a helpless feeling of immeasurable loss.

IN THE cold, gray light of dawn, the cabin shivered to a thunderous knocking. Joel tumbled from bed, threw on a dressing gown, and greeted Pete Martin at the door. Martin was backed by half a dozen husky homesteaders.

"Thought I'd let you know we're headin' along the wolf-trail."

Joel grumpily asserted the idea was a fine one, he was glad to know it, and now would they go away and let him sleep?

"We wouldn't have stopped," Martin apologized, "except we wondered about your visitor last night."

Joel's jaw cracked in the middle of a yawn. He swallowed hard and flushed blackly.

"Visitor? What visitor?" he hedged.

The homesteader crooked a finger, and Joel followed out upon the porch. Martin pointed out the wolf-tracks that crossed and recrossed the yard.

"Those are the tracks of your white bitch, Joel. She came home last night. Didn't see her, did you?"

Joel closed his eyes. He felt a swimming sensation in his head.

"No. No, I didn't see her." Fantastically, he thought of the visitor he had seen, and thought of her body mutilated and torn by sharp wolf-fangs. He shuddered.

The homesteader shrugged. "Keep a lookout for her, Joel. She'll be back again . . . if we don't git her first!"

He gestured to his companions, and they filed off into the forest. Joel stood alone, looking down at the tracks . . . at one track that had gone unnoticed by the others—the single print of a woman's shapely foot.

JOEL CAMERON was pleased with his own industry. He finished proofreading the final chapter of his book, gathered the manuscript together, and wrapped it for shipment. There, it was off his mind.

He took the manuscript down to the village post office, collected a few necessary supplies. Toward sunset, he legged into his car and chugged away up the county road toward home.

Night shadows fell swiftly. The sky turned smoky, then sequinned. The moon came up full over the roof of the forest.

Joel turned into the ruts that meandered through the woods to his cabin. Wobbling headlamps bored a tunnel through the gloom. The night was eerily still throughout the pine woods. Joel slewed the machine around a bumpy turn. The wolf-woman stood starkly illumined in the glare of the headlights.

Joel jammed a foot on the brakes. He scrambled from his seat, calling. Eena flashed into the shadows. After two minutes struggle with the whipping underbrush, Joel gave up and went back to his car.

He was suddenly lonesome and despondent. He ground the coupé through the final furlong and killed the motor in front of the cabin.

Eena sat quietly upon the porch.

Even with the lights off, Joel could see her there. Her form was tawny gold in the moonlight. Her hair was a flashing, silver aura enhaloing her laughing face.

Joel started toward her, thought better of it, and sat on the runningboard. Eena was less than ten feet away. Joel said nothing. Eena answered in kind.

After a while, Joel began to talk to her, softly. He mused and wondered aloud, letting his thoughts drift with the association of his words. Eena cocked her head attentively. She appeared to be listening, but he knew that his words held no meaning for her.

What language would serve him? What syllables would convey to her knowledge of the tumultuous beating in his breast her simple presence evoked?

He moved toward her, murmuring softly. He took the firm, golden flesh of her arm in his grasp. Eena looked up into Joel's strong kindly face. Her eyes spoke the thought her tongue could not.

Joel drew her gently to her feet. She swayed, and he caught her to him. Her lips were as tender and responsive as he had dreamed they would be. He took them, hungrily. . . .

EENA prowled the forest resentfully. She hated to be hunted. Twice, now, the coming of the full moon had brought her only pangs of frustration. The hunters who swarmed in the woods prevented her going to the man she loved.

The pine woods shimmered in the heat of midsummer. Hunters from all over the state, attracted by the enormous price on Eena's hide, came to blunder among the hills. When they went away, defeated, others came instead of them.

Eena had no rest. She was hounded and harried. By night, the forest twinkled with campfires.

Once, a hunter reckless enough to hunt alone, had cornered the she-wolf. Braving the fire of his weapon, Eena attacked and ripped the man to shreds of bloody ruin. The price on Eena's life doubled overnight.

Once, too, she had been trapped by a horde of hunters and their dogs at the lip of a precipice, overlooking Wolf Lake. The she-wolf leaped, and swam to safety through a hail of lead. The rock thereafter was called Wolf Leap, and Eena's character became legendary.

The swelling moon nightly presaged the approach of the change. Eena longed for it, longed for the pleasure of her human form, and gladly paid with the pangs of her return to the wolf. All the savage ferocity of her wolf nature rebelled at the restriction the presence of hunters imposed. Then cunning asserted itself.

Joel's cabin lay westward. Eena turned her pointed muzzle into the east. On silent pads she fled through the silver and dross of the moonlit forest. At dawn, she rested.

Facing northward, she took up her way for a number of hours; then she turned into the west.

It was not easy running. The way led up steep mountainsides, down precipitous declivities. She swam mountain torrents, crossed ravines on fallen pines. When she hungered, she pulled down a white-tailed deer and gorged on the kill.

In midafternoon, Eena made her way southward. She had completely encircled the hunters that swarmed in the forest.

The white wolf came at last into familiar territory at the west end of the lake. She slackened her pace, although a frantic urge to hurry assailed her. She knew the limitations of her human form, and with moonrise tonight the Change would be visited upon her. She wanted to be close by the cabin when that came to pass.

She had slightly more than an hour to span the miles that yet lay between.

Eena skulked along in the shadowy underbrush, pausing at intervals to scent for danger. She soon paralleled the lakeshore, a hurrying white wraith in the green-gray shadows of the forest. The wind brought a smell of dampness off the lake, a formless breath of stale fishiness. The pines cast long shadows upon the water. The sky darkened in the east.

A rifle cracked. The whistling missile spent itself far out over the lake, and Eena gathered her muscles with the instant response of spring steel and lunged ahead. A man yelled, and dogs began to bark frantically. Eena doubled away from the lake, putting on a fresh burst of speed.

The wind had betrayed her. It had come to her nostrils from the sterile face of the water, while her danger lay on the other hand.

A rifle spat livid flame in the green gloom ahead. Eena leaped, snarling and snapping at the trenchant pain in her shoulder. Spurting blood reddened her muzzle, stained the snowy pelt of her side.

Other rifles cracked all around her. Rifle balls whined nastily through the woods. The yelping of dogs was bedlam.

The white wolf recovered her stride in spite of her searing wound. She ran with desperation and terror hounding her, her goal an idea interlocked with the memory of a kindly face and a soothing voice.

Eena fled for the protection of the one being in all the forest whom she loved, the one man among men who loved her.

Joel Cameron heard the flat racketing of gunfire, the distant shouting and yelping. A strange uneasiness held him motionless, listening. He caught up his rifle and hurried to the door.

The noise swelled louder by the moment. Twilight pressed down upon the forest, swirled into the clearing about the cabin. Joel saw the men, then, flitting silhouettes between the pines, limned against the tarnished silver of the lake. The forest trembled with the belling of the dog-pack.

His ears caught another sound, nearer . . . more terrifying. He heard the swift whisper of racing pads, the sound of a heavy body hurtling through the undergrowth.

The enormous, pale form of the wolf leaped from the forest edge, charged relentlessly toward him. A mental gong sounded in the man's clamoring brain. Joel's rifle snapped automatically into the hollow of his shoulder. The report ripped echoes from the hills.

The murderous shock of the ball lifted the white wolf, flung her with bleeding breast back upon her haunches. Gathering the last atom of her strength, Eena lunged and fell kicking at Joe Cameron's feet.

The man sighted carefully for the mercy shot that would send a bullet crashing into Eena's brain. The moon came up full over the shoulder of the mountain, bridged the lake with its golden track, thrust a questing beam through a gap in the pines.

The effulgent glow caressed Eena's wolf-form. Eena died with the ecstasy of the Change soothing the agony of her hurts.

Joel stared, uncomprehending. The rifle fell from his nerveless grasp. Slowly, his knees buckled. He dropped beside the huddled girl-shape, gathered limp, tawny shoulders against his chest and buried his face in the silver cloud of her hair.

He was holding her like that when the hunters burst into the moonlit clearing. He did not look up, even when they went silently away.

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The Occupant of the Crypt

BY AUGUST DERLETH and MARK SCHORER

Far below the house was the ancient crypt, sealed tight for very good and dreadful reason

ABOUT twenty minutes after Eric Somerset alighted from the London Midnight Express at Blackpool, he began to curse the station-agent in no very genteel fashion. Fortunately, that individual was nowhere in sight; neither was a shelter from the rain and fog. It was hardy reasonable to expect the station-agent's presence at one o'clock in the morning, even if he must have known of Somerset's arrival because of sending him the telegram that lay, wet and crumpled, in Somerset's hand.

The thought of it brought Somerset to reading it again:

COME AT ONCE BLACKPOOL BRING WILL STOP MEET YOU ONE O'CLOCK.
LONSDALE

Remembering that Lord Lonsdale was the firm's best client sobered him. He took off his pince-nez and wiped them. For the first time he was aware of the noise of a horn above the din of the rain on the station's tin roof. At the same moment he spied the car's dimmed headlights and heard a girl's voice calling.

"Is that Mr. Somerset? Come this way, please."

He lost no time, snatching up his briefcase and running with all his might toward the car, his glasses swinging wildly around him.

The car's rooflight was on. With her left arm braced against the glass, Amber Joyce bent away from the upholstered seat, leaning forward enough to catch a good glimpse of Somerset.

Miss Joyce's eyes twinkled. "Slam the door. Beastly weather, isn't it?"

A moment later the machine pulled away from the curb, spattering the back with heavy mud. Miss Joyce turned to the solicitor.

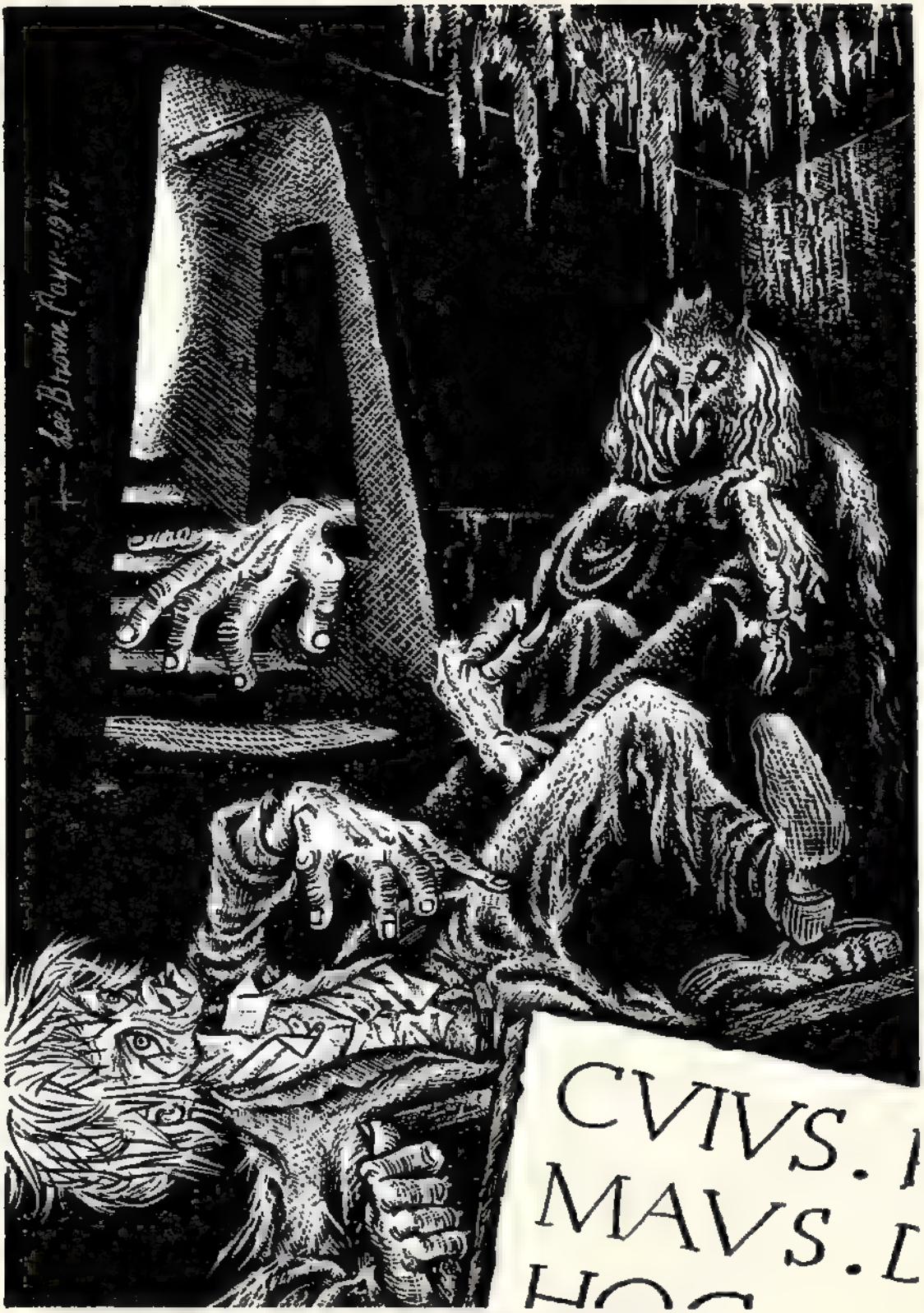
Somerset cleared his throat and asked, "What's happened?"

Amber Joyce sank back nervously. Her voice, coming at last, sounded vague and frightened. "Uncle Arthur's disappeared."

"That scapegrace! That ought to relieve Lonsdale, if anything."

Miss Joyce shrugged. "The circumstances of his disappearance were very strange. Uncle Arthur had come up to see Uncle Hilary; they were on pretty good terms that night. I went to bed early, but I couldn't sleep. At about two o'clock I heard a scream, followed by a thudding crash. I got up and went down into the library, where I had left the men. Uncle Hilary was there, sound asleep. Uncle Arthur was gone, but he'd left his stick behind.

"I shook Uncle Hilary until he woke. He looked at me in a dazed way and said, 'I thought you'd gone to bed, Amber.' I said I had, but something had brought me down again. Then he turned to face the chair that Uncle Arthur had been using, and began to say something; half-way through the sentence he stopped and said, 'Has Arthur gone, then?' He looked sort of frightened. 'When did he go?' he asked. 'Was I sleeping?' I said that it was two o'clock. Then suddenly he turned to the stand next his chair, took up his wine glass, and muttered something. I heard it. He



Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

said, 'Drugged my wine, did he?' Then he packed me off to bed again.

"Next morning he seemed troubled. At about ten o'clock he tried to telephone Arthur; he hadn't come in. The housekeeper said Uncle Arthur hadn't come back. That was three days ago, and there's been no word from Uncle Arthur since."

"There's no evidence that Arthur left the house that night?" asked Somerset.

"None. Uncle Hilary's been very uneasy. Yesterday he sent for Uncle Napier—Father Napier, you know, his older brother."

SOMERSET frowned. "If he sends for Napier, your Uncle Hilary fears something serious has happened to Arthur. Has he dropped any suspicion in your hearing?"

Amber Joyce nodded. "Yesterday I overheard Uncle Hilary talking to Father Napier." For a moment she was silent. "Mr. Somerset, did you know there's a weird sort of superstition in our family?"

"I wasn't aware of it."

"Uncle Hilary's grandfather—my great-grandfather, that is, built that house up there on the site of an ancient monastery or abbey, I don't know which. Anyway, it wasn't until after Henry VIII's time that genuine priests—priests of God, I mean—ever got into that building. Before that, some devilish cult thrived there." Miss Joyce paused. "I sound like a cheap novel, don't I?" She coughed a little. "But there's something in it, just the same. Uncle Hilary has some old books about the place, and in several there's mention of some ghastly thing; it says *thing*, and the inference is pretty clear that it was a living thing, a sort of entity, which was found there by the priests.

"Nothing definite—but it appears that the building was torn down, and the land taken over by the government, and held until great-grandfather bought it. He left something to pique the curiosity of those who came after him. Far below the house as it now stands there's a very old crypt; great grandfather in his written instructions to his children hints that this crypt existed long before the old Lonsdale line came into being; that's pretty old, you know. The crypt is sealed, though accessible from the library of the house, and also from a drawing-room on the second floor. The family superstition concerns this crypt; it's never to be opened; the oldest member of each generation in the direct line was to be informed of its existence, no one else. But since Uncle Napier entered the priesthood, the title and estates fell to Uncle Hilary.

"Somehow the story of the crypt got to Uncle Arthur, and he got it into his head that there was treasure down there. What Uncle Hilary has begun to suspect is that Uncle Arthur drugged him; so he could go down and look into the crypt for himself."

"A reasonable suspicion, in view of his brother's more or less incontinent life."

"You restrain yourself with *incontinent*, Mr. Somerset." Amber Joyce laughed. "It's still difficult for Uncle Hilary to see how Uncle Arthur could have got down there, because both openings to the crypt are panel arrangements, cleverly hidden, and the passage through the wall is narrow and pretty secret."

"A determined man will do anything."

The car jolted to a stop. In a moment the door swung open. The chauffeur, holding an opened umbrella, guided first Amber Joyce and then Somerset onto the wide verandah. They stood there, smiling at each other in the warm glow from the half-open door.

SOMERSET found himself within a half-hour in dressing gown and slippers, a welcome change from his wet clothes. He met Amber Joyce on the way to the library; she was standing in a niche, waiting for him. She wore a dress of some dark stuff, blending with the darkness of the corridor. A shaft of light struck her only at the throat, where she had bound a brilliant green scarf.

"Uncle Hilary's gone to the crypt," she said as Somerset came up to her.

Father Napier, a tall thin man, closely resembling Lord Lonsdale, stood meditatively alone as the solicitor entered the library with Amber Joyce. He turned toward Somerset.

"I understand his lordship has gone down into the forbidden crypt," said the solicitor, after greetings had been exchanged.

Father Napier nodded. "Amber told you, then?"

"How long has he been gone?" asked Somerset.

"About ten minutes—he went down after you came."

"One would think," fumed Somerset, "considering what time it is, that he might hurry."

"I think he's coming now," said Amber Joyce suddenly.

In the abrupt silence that fell, footsteps could be heard. They seemed to be coming upward from far below the house, yet close to the library, along the wall.

"The panel is just over there," said Father Napier. He indicated a section of bookshelves toward which Somerset turned an expectant eye.

Then Amber Joyce said something, and the noise of the ascending footsteps was lost. When she had finished, the sound had stopped.

"Odd," murmured Father Napier. "He must have gone on to the second floor."

"But he wouldn't do that," said Amber Joyce.

Father Napier coughed. "I think we'd better go look for him," he said quietly. He turned slightly toward the silent figure of the butler standing impassive in the shadows. "Frobisher, you stay here with Miss Joyce. Mr. Somerset and I will go down into the crypt."

The priest went to the wall and touched a spring which Somerset could not see. A panel swung back, disclosing a narrow passage beyond.

"We'll have to go single file," said Father Napier.

"You lead," said Somerset.

The two of them stepped into the wall, walked a short distance along the passage, and came to a flight of stone steps, curving slightly below the foundations of the house. They went down. Presently the stairs began to broaden a little, and they came to a flat space. The ceiling was so low that they had to crouch and crawl along. There followed another short flight of stairs, and then suddenly the flashlight fell upon a half-open stone door, opening into a terrifying darkness. It was the crypt, and there was no light, as there should have been.

"Hilary," called Father Napier suddenly.

There was no answer. Father Napier pushed on cautiously, leaning against the door to move it back a little more. The light struck a large stone coffin, from which the lid had been pushed to one side. Curiously, Father Napier and Somerset stepped closer.

"There's a Latin inscription here," said Somerset.

Father Napier turned his flash on the inscription. "Will you read it; I can't."

Somerset bent laboriously to the task.

"CVIVS . PASSVS . HIC . INSTAT .
CVIVS . MANVS . DESCENDIT .
HOC . SEPVLCRVM . VT . TANGAT .
EI . CERTE . MORIENDVM . EST ."

"Roughly," translated the priest:

"Whose step halt here
Whose hand descends
To touch this bier
That man shall die."

He coughed. "Not very comforting."

But Somerset was no longer listening. The flash had wavered a little, and a shaft of light had been thrown to a far corner of the crypt; Somerset, following that shaft of light with his eyes, saw suddenly a man's shoe, and above it a human leg.

In as steady a voice as he could command, he said, "Please flash that light into that corner. I think there's someone there."

Father Napier came around the empty coffin and sent the light into the corner. In the yellow glow lay the crumpled body of a man, his clothes horribly torn, his upturned face ghastly.

The light began to tremble in Father Napier's hand. "Arthur!" he exclaimed. He made no move to approach the body, though Somerset went forward immediately.

Somerset said, "He's been dead for at least three days." He came away from the body. "Let's get out of this place; I'm afraid something's happened to his lordship."

Father Napier said nothing; apparently deep in thought, he went out of the crypt, Somerset following. Then, abruptly, came a sound which held them both on the threshold of the crypt. It was a low moan —an unmistakably human sound!

The light swung around, halting abruptly at a niche in the stone passage. A shuddering hand lay palm upward in the passage, and beyond it, bent together in the niche, was Lord Lonsdale. Somerset ran forward, pulling at his lordship.

"He's living," he said shortly. "We must get him upstairs. He must have had a terrible struggle with something. Lend me a hand, will you?"

Father Napier came forward, more steady now. "Something horrible has happened," he said quietly. "Do you remember hearing something go upstairs?"

Mr. Somerset nodded, suddenly remembering. "What was it?" he asked. "Something . . . from down there?"

"The crypt should never have been opened. I don't think you and I can cope with this thing—if only it's no longer in the house. I'm going to call someone who can."

PROFESSOR Charles Lambert groaned a little in his sleep; then he turned over and awoke. The telephone bell was skirling shrilly. He shook himself a little and picked up the instrument.

"Hullo?"

"Lambert? This is Napier."

"You woke me!"

Napier went on, apparently not heeding him. "You remember that conversation we had about ancient cults and mysteries last weekend? I know you do. Listen, can you get a short leave? Something's come up out here at Hilary's place, something I think you would like to be in on, something I want you in on. My brother Arthur's been killed, and Hilary's been attacked. Something from below—yes, from the old crypt I mentioned to you last weekend. It was opened, and something came up out of there. We were in the library. Heard someone walking. Thought at first it must be Hilary. It wasn't. We've found Hilary, badly bruised down near the crypt. Whatever came up has escaped—it's out of the house. We've got to get the thing before it can do any more harm. Can you come down at once?"

Lambert was wide-awake. The tense, excited tones of his ordinarily gentle clerical friend, and the almost incoherent story he was jerkily telling him over the wire had drawn him quickly from the semi-conscious state in which he had first taken up the telephone. "Yes," he said. "I can get down by noon today."

Professor Lambert pulled on his dressing-gown and went into his library where he lost himself in the yellowed pages of an ancient volume to which he had gone unerringly. The faded handwriting in the book was difficult to follow, but he persevered, turning page after page in the glow of a reading lamp, until presently he found what he sought—a short paragraph deep in the heart of the volume. . . .

"These eldritch beings, sprung from the source of all evil, know but one fear. Arms and steel are of no avail against them, even though they are of form, of a certain flesh and blood—blood being their power and their life, because of which in their freedom they seek it endlessly, and woe betide the unfortunate in their path. Evil these things are and will always be, and they fear only their one great and true enemy, which is good, and the source of all good, which is God. And the more steeped in goodness, the stronger shall the charm be. . . ."

He closed the book and, going over to a collection of old silver carefully boxed into the wall, he chose a crucifix and an ancient medallion. Now, but for dressing, he was ready.

Lambert found Frobisher awaiting him on the verandah, and followed him up the stairs to Lonsdale's room. There, on the great oaken bed, he saw Lord Lonsdale himself, heavily swathed in bandages. Around him stood Father Napier, Amber Joyce, and Somerset, all of whom Lambert knew well. Father Napier hurried to greet him, his hand outstretched.

"Good of you to come, Lambert. Hilary's just come to. Doctor says he'll be all right. We're waiting for him to talk—though he's had a devilish shock."

"Attacked . . . by . . .?"

Father Napier nodded hastily. "Severely. Seems to have lost a good deal of blood, besides suffering from a great many deep scratches. Wrist broken, too. We've called an ambulance to take him to a hospital. It would be better for him there."

"Quite right," murmured Lambert, ap-

proaching the bed. He exchanged hushed greetings with the others in the room, then looked at the face of Lord Lonsdale, wan and pale on the pillow. His eyes were moving back and forth, taking in the people who watched him so closely.

Suddenly his lordship spoke. "What happened to Arthur? I saw him there—in the crypt."

"Dead," said Napier quietly.

Hilary groaned slightly. "Drugged me, you know," he said. The group about the bed waited in silence. Then, without introduction, Lord Lonsdale spoke, his eyes fastened on the ceiling. "It came out of the crypt—as the paper said, Napier. I came down, looking for Arthur . . . the door of the crypt was unsealed, but it had closed somehow from the inside. Probably closed before Arthur got the coffin open. I opened it, just a little. It was waiting. It was on me, clutching, crushing . . . had me on the floor, dragging me along . . . I don't remember what happened. . . . Isn't out, is it?" He raised himself a little, weakly. There was no answer, and at once he guessed. "God help us!" he murmured, falling back and closing his eyes.

Napier bent over him. "Listen, Hilary, we're sending you into the city—to a hospital. You'll be better there."

Lord Lonsdale made no response. His breathing went on, deep and fast.

SHORTLY after mid-afternoon, the three men and Amber Joyce gathered in the library. Somerset produced his portfolio, looking at Father Napier. "I daresay, in the circumstances, it's best that the whole group know about your late father's letter, despite his explicit wishes?"

Napier nodded.

Somerset opened his case and withdrew a single paper, which he began at once to read.

"My dear Son: As the future Lord Lonsdale, it is essential that you have certain information concerning Lonsdale House, information which has been handed down from generation to generation, ever since this house was built. Lonsdale House is built on the foundations of an old abbey, dating back to perhaps 1400, an abbey not occupied by monks until near 1550.

"What hellish people first occupied this site is not known. One hundred and fifty years remain unaccounted for in its history. Yet there are certain legends, vague rumors and tales, which in their own way characterize the first inhabitants. Certainly they were not monks. There are stories of ancient cults of evil, not unlike the Druids. I have heard that a cult established itself in a building on Blackpool Heath. There are weird tales of strange, uncanny creatures loping over the countryside, killing and destroying, leaving their victims crushed and bloodless.

"There is historical evidence of something existing here, and there is added record of strange crimes and disappearances as late at 1545. Yes, and even after the monks came in 1550, some of them disappeared. The abbey was at this time much closer to the sea, and it was thought for a time that the monks had been taken by some strange sea creature. There is a half-formed belief that whatever was worshipped originally here was bound in some way to the sea, perhaps first came from the sea. None can say anything definite about the site of Lonsdale House.

"Yet, something remains. The first inhabitants of this site left something, and this the monks later discovered, and by their own power locked this thing in a crypt far below the abbey. And when Lonsdale House rose on the site of the abbey, the crypt was still sealed. The first Lord Lonsdale built the secret stair that leads to it from the panel in the library, and from the panel in the wall of the second-floor drawing room.

"The thing is in a stone coffin, likewise sealed, within the sealed crypt. I tell you these things for your own good, and to warn you. We do not know what thing is down there, but it is a thing of evil, and it is better that we do not know. Therefore, the crypt must never be opened.

"Keep this that I have revealed to you a secret, for it is better that only one in each generation should know. Further knowledge makes for curiosity, and curiosity makes here for peril and utmost horror. Therefore, *do not seek out the occupant of the crypt below!*"

There was a long moment of silence. Then Amber coughed and said, "Wasn't

Uncle Arthur found—crushed and bloodless?"

Napier looked uncomfortable. Then he said, "Yes, he was found that way. Arthur didn't know what to expect in the crypt; he knew less than we, by far. He knew only that the crypt was down there, that there was something mysterious about it, and naturally, his mind went to hidden treasure. He went down, and very likely he had been imbibing freely. He broke the seals on the crypt, and pried open the coffin. The thing in the coffin attacked and killed him. The door, I think, swung shut behind him, and the thing could not get it open. Then Hilary came down, and he in turn was attacked and left half-dead on the floor."

Lambert cut in. "The thing obviously has intelligence, for it found its way out of the house, though its leaving the passage on the second floor instead of in the library seems only a fortunate chance."

Napier nodded. "And the window was open and the room empty."

He paused significantly. Amber drew her arm tightly through his. He looked down at her. "Nothing to fear, my child," he said. "The thing was glad enough apparently to get out of here. I don't think it will come back."

"Yet," said Amber suddenly, "this is the only home it had for years. Perhaps. . . ."

Frobisher entered noiselessly; he was perturbed, and at once Amber Joyce came to her feet. "Anything wrong, Frobisher?" she asked.

"The paper, Miss Joyce," he said. He held out a newspaper, folded upon a lead. Amber Joyce had only time to see the headline, "OUTRAGE NEAR BLACKPOOL" when Father Napier snatched the paper from Frobisher.

He glanced hurriedly over the account, his face paling. Then he looked up. "Listen to this!" he said sharply, and read: " 'Early this morning two laborers on their way to work were assaulted on the highroad between Blackpool and Liddleton. The bodies of the two men, John Thornton and Frank Doyle, were discovered later this morning near the road about three miles from the Lonsdale estate. Apparently the men made a powerful struggle, for they were both almost crushed and horribly mangled. First examination of the bodies seemed to indicate that much blood had been lost, though there is no evidence of this on the ground near where the bodies were found.

" 'There is no clue to the identity of the killer, but Blackpool officials are searching the surrounding country. A peculiarity of the search has been the discovery of depressions in the earth as if someone had dragged or pushed along some large shapeless object.' "

To each of them there had come the same horrible dread, the same sudden fear of unknown death so near to them, four times attempted, three times completed.

It was Lambert's cool voice that broke the silence. "We've got to hunt that thing out at once, and hope that we may not come too late!"

FATHER NAPIER was on his feet on the instant; he moved to a shelf of books, from which he took down an atlas. He went toward Lambert, holding the atlas open at a detail map of Lancastershire.

"Here we are," he said. "Blackpool and its environs. Here's Liddleton." His index finger drew a straight line from a square marked "Lonsdale Estate" to the hamlet called Liddleton. Then it went back and stopped on a square midway between the two. "The ruins of Pemberton Lodge," he murmured. "It must have been heading there. Almost an acre of tumbled-down stone buildings in which to hide until night. Then, abroad again. Tonight, more attacks. We must go for that thing now, before sundown."

Somerset motioned to the butler. "Frobisher, bring down Lord Lonsdale's pistols."

Lambert stopped him, smiling. "They won't do us any good, Somerset. You can't fight an unholy thing like this with man-made weapons. There's only one force stronger than the evil one represented in the thing we're pursuing. That's the holy power of good against which this thing stands opposed."

Napier and Somerset nodded quickly, understanding. Lambert went on. "I've got an ancient crucifix, and an equally old medallion. Both were blessed by St. Augustine. I think they'll protect us."

Somerset said, "Well, are we ready?"

Outside, they stepped into the waiting car and started toward Liddleton. It was already almost half past four, and the dimness of autumn dusk was mingling with the heavy fog that came in from the sea. Driving along the road, they could see only the faintest outline of trees on either side. In the distance they could hear the roll of the ocean, coming from beyond Lonsdale House. But the chauffeur, at the urgent order of Father Napier, did not lessen his customary speed because of the fog. He knew the road over the moors to the neighboring Liddleton, and he knew the ruins of Pemberton Lodge, where he had often driven Miss Joyce and parties of picknickers. The car swung suddenly off the main road and came to a stop.

The three men stepped from the car and stood there for a moment, looking about them in the fog-ridden dusk. The motor roared as the driver turned the car about, then subsided suddenly. In the silence, the booming of the sea from behind was the first sound that reached them. Before them, slowly emerging from the heavy atmosphere, was the gray silhouette of the main ruin of what had once been Pemberton Lodge. The three men walked slowly closer. Father Napier flashed ahead the light he was carrying, but its ray did little to pierce the fog. They stopped at the fallen arch of the main door. Father Napier moved the light about in the shadowy pit that confronted them, and then, holding aloft the crucifix he carried, stepped under the arch.

There came suddenly a low rumbling from the fog beyond, a sound as of some heavy thing lumbering over broken stones. Then there was a snarl of fury and fear. Directly upon the sound a great shadowy figure appeared ahead of them, emerging from the arch of a long broken window, lumbering from this gap. The three men wheeled about.

"There!" shouted Father Napier.

But already the thing was moving awkwardly away from them, its great head bobbing, its cumbrous arms swinging; already it was loping away over the moor, lost in the fog before they could think of moving after it.

They ran back to the car and clambered in. Father Napier shouted, "Up the Blackpool road!"

The motor roared once more in the deepening dusk, and sped away up the highway. Abruptly, the chauffeur pulled on the brakes, and the motor ground to a halt.

"What's wrong?" demanded Napier.

"Someone trying to cross the road, sir. Just missed him, I think."

Father Napier leaned forward, piercing the fog illuminated by the brilliant headlights, and saw, in that moment, the thing disappearing in the trees near the highway. It had crossed the road almost immediately ahead of them. He jumped out and ran to the side of the highway, stopping under the row of trees that marked it off from the heath. There he saw it disappearing once more, moving clumsily yet swiftly over the heath. And then he saw, directly in its path, the lights of Lonsdale House.

He came running back to the car, shouting, "Quickly, to the house!" Somerset and Lambert, equally excited, leaned forward anxiously. Father Napier sank back in his seat. Then as the car plunged ahead into the night, he exclaimed breathlessly, "It's cutting back to the house, and Amber's there alone with Frobisher."

AMBER JOYCE, left alone in the library had paced back and forth across the room for some time in great excitement. She stood out on the terrace extending over the top of the cliff; she was restless still, and disturbed. Though she returned at last to the library, and opened a book, she could not read.

In the distance she heard a motor roaring, and wondered whether the three men were already coming back. Then she sat up suddenly, an abrupt scream tearing into her consciousness.

She heard vague, terrifying sounds, coming from the front of the house—a sound as of a door crashing inward somewhere, a man's voice moaning, lumbering thuds in the corridor beyond the library. Then abruptly the library door caved inward, and before her in the dim half-light stood the thing she knew instinctively to have come from the crypt. She had only a glimpse of its black, horny body, its red little eyes, its long swinging ape-like arms before it

sprang toward her. She remembered suddenly the conversation of a few hours before —something about holy things, and at the same instant she leaped back against the wall and wrenched down the old abbey crucifix which had been kept in the library.

Then she braced herself against the wall, holding the crucifix out before her, and stared at the thing, halted now. There came from it now a sound not unlike a whimper, and it struck Amber Joyce abruptly that the thing was frightened. It, too, pressed itself against the wall, moving slowly away from her along the shelves of books.

The sound of a car screeching to a stop outside came to Amber Joyce's ears. The thing also heard, paused a moment, then moved awkwardly back toward the broken library door. It was too late—already running footsteps could be heard coming down the corridor. Father Napier appeared suddenly, holding before him a crucifix, and the thing gave way before him. Amber Joyce slid silently to the floor; she had fainted.

Somerset and Professor Lambert ran into the room, each of them guarded, and the thing sprang, striking the shelved wall with a tremendous impact, crashing it at the panel, and went lumbering out of sight, down the stairs. Father Napier ran quickly to Amber Joyce. Lambert and Somerset stood listening to the retreating thuds—sounds moving heavily down, down, down . . . until they were lost in the depths of the crypt.

Lambert spoke quietly, urgently. "The thing's vampiric, Napier. And we can get it with a stake, preferably an iron one. If we settle this thing now, there'll be an end to it—otherwise, there's no telling what might happen."

Father Napier nodded. "Yes. I know just the thing we want. A large staple in the wall—it's loose—down near the crypt." He looked at Somerset, and added, "Somerset, stay here with Amber. Call the chauffeur if you need someone. Lambert and I will go down."

Somerset nodded, and bent to take up the slight form of Amber Joyce. The two men approached the broken wall carefully, then stepped beyond it into the passage, out of sight. Somerset, chafing Miss Joyce's hands, heard the sound of their descending footsteps, the sound of boots striking stones, hearing the two men make a cautious but certain descent. He heard a muffled sound of stone rubbing stone. Then, silence. He stood there a moment, perplexed, then lowered Amber Joyce gently to the couch before him.

The chauffeur appeared suddenly in the doorway, and Somerset was glad to see him.

"Are there any salts about?" he asked. "Miss Joyce has fainted."

"I'll get some, sir." The chauffeur retreated.

Somerset sat on the edge of the couch, listening. Echoes of some indistinguishable sound came up from the crypt—a low, mumbling as of some chanting, or incantation. Then there was a sudden, horrible wail that crept upward, a wail so ghastly, so terrible, that Somerset shuddered, and the chauffeur who had not gone far, came running back into the room, trembling and white.

Father Napier and Lambert came from the aperture in the wall just as Amber Joyce came to. "Dust in an old coffin," said Napier. "Nothing more. . . ." He put the crucifix on the table, and his hand shook in the lamplight.

The Stranger

(To Lord Dunsany)

By LEAH BODINE DRAKE

THE stranger, the proud-headed man
Who sat with us by the inn's fire,
Spoke all that day of gusty rain
Of the land of his desire.

It is a land of apple-trees (he said)
On islands watered by many a spring,
The boughs bearing both bloom and fruit
Where, leaf-hidden, the white birds sing.

White towers they have there, scarlet-roofed,
Circled with rivers, windowed with amethyst,
Where dwell the beautiful, smiling folk
Who doeth as they list,

And little of that is evil. Love and death
Trouble also that land with their old story,
But set in loftier halls and under sunnier skies
And rainbowed with glory.

And there are quests for alien grails, and angels walk
At sunset on the desolate shrunken sands.
There is no sorrow less than the fall of thrones,
And the winged sphinx is the terror of the land.

Up the jagged mountains, over the cold plateaus,
Curious bugles ring from thunderous cliffs
Where, furred with otter and belted with peridots,
Kings and young princes hunt the hippogriffs.

And those are the perilous mountains of the trolls
Who hoard the rubies that the witches fear.
That is the country whence I came (he said),
It is not here, not here.

The Pale Criminal

BY

C. HALL THOMPSON

Heading by FRED HUMISTON

"An idea made this pale criminal pale. Adequate was he for the deed when he did it, but the idea of it, he could not endure when it was done."

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

An evil that lingers in shadow beyond the understanding of normal minds

I CONFESS, in the beginning the case of Simon Conrad did not strike me as singular. On my first visit to the Castle von Zengerstein, I had no suspicion of the secret that lay hidden in the vaults of that Gothic pile that towered on a craggy hill-crest at the Black Forest's edge. I found Luther Markheim, master of Zengerstein, nothing more than a mountainous relic of the decadent line that spawned him; he and his companion, one Doctor Victor Rupert, were mildly concerned over the fate of

Simon Conrad, but they feared they could be of little assistance since they had never even seen the gentleman in question. It was all very commonplace. No hint of the festering evil of Zengerstein seeped through the veneer of ordinariness.

But, events have taken a strange turn. The Conrad affair is no longer simply a missing persons case; it is a crime whose hideous memory still lurks in the mirror of the tarn that separates the Castle from the deserted village of Zengerstein. Perhaps, when you have come to know the facts of the case, you will say that I, Ludwig Koch, Inspector of Police of the town of Donaueschingen, some twenty kilometres to the north, should have guessed at the macabre truth. But, I am a simple man. My dealings in the world of crime had been with petty theft and trespassing. Never before had I been drawn into such a web of malignity as shrouded the house of Luther Markheim. I had heard men whisper, on a winter's night in the hofbrau, of an evil that lingers in shadow, beyond the understanding of normal minds; once, on a visit to Baden, I had seen the Teufels Kanzel on the brink of the Schwarzwald, where, legend has it, the Devil preached to his disciples; to me, it seemed only an altar of scorched stone. The supernatural has always been beyond my ken. But, of late, I have undergone a change. Having witnessed the horror of Zengerstein, only an idiot could remain an unbeliever.

The entire truth of the affair has never before been disclosed. For years, it has lain in the police archives, at Donaueschingen, buried in the rotting pages of the manuscript of Luther Markheim. Only recently it was decided that in view of work being done by one Sigmund Freud in a new field called psychiatry, it would be advisable to release the story of Zengerstein that these doctors might benefit by study of the quirks of a criminal mind in action. To outward appearances, the manuscript does not seem extraordinary; it was written in ink by a precise hand the story is told with scientific clarity; and, except one turned to the last scrawled lines, except one examined the brownish stains on the final pages and knew them to be the marks of dried blood, one would never guess that these words were written by a man who had been blind for nearly a decade.

The Markheim Manuscript

There is so little time. Now, in the night, here in my bedchamber, I should feel safe. I should know that there can be no truth in the unholy phantasms that have come to haunt my every waking moment. The doors are locked. Nothing could penetrate those ponderous panels... Nothing human. Yet, at every whimper of the wind in the grate, I start; the howling of the wolfhounds gnaws at my nerves. Rain sobs against the casement, lashed by the winds sweeping up from the River Murg. And throughout the stormy night, Koch and his deputies continue to wander the Black Forest, their lanterns bobbing like cat's-eyes in outer darkness. Still they search for Simon Conrad. Soon, perhaps, they shall return to Zengerstein to question me again. But, it is not Koch I fear. It is that thing no barred portal can ward off; that bloated livid face that floats somewhere in the well of the mirror by the bed; dark beings stir in the pit beyond that glass; and every moment, the scabrous visage grows nearer, the blind eyes burn more fiercely. Soon, it will rise from the crypts beneath the castle. I know. There is no escape. Soon, the time will have run out. And then, the slash of the scalpel, the pale face pressed close to mine—and death. The same death that monster brought to Simon Conrad short weeks ago.

It is incredible that things have come to this impasse. Every step of my plan was laid with such care. And, now, at the final moment, the whole structure crumbles beneath me. There can be but one answer. Somewhere, I have made a mistake; some thread of the web has tangled and snapped. Perhaps, if I retrace every step, there may yet be time for reparation. I must be exceedingly careful. I must not slip again. This is my last chance.

IT BEGAN nine years ago, in Freiburg, in the winter of 189–. I was a different man, then. I was not a ponderous object of pity with a scarred face and sightless eyes; people then did not avoid me and

turn to their friends to whisper that a "has-been" always depressed them. In December of 189–, I was one of the most successful men in the city of the Hapsburgs. Mine was a place of honor at the banquet-tables of the Freiherren. My huge bulk then was the impressive figure of a man in the prime of life, well-dressed, imposing, a monument to the scientific genius it embodied; women marvelled at my delicate, sensitive hands—the hands of Herr Doktor Luther Markheim, one of the greatest surgeons in Germany. I was chief of staff at the Spital Hapsburg; the universities of Vienna had honored me with degrees for my work in surgical research. Countless students came to me, inspired, to study the art of the knife; it was among them that I discovered Victor Rupert.

He was not an idiot. An idiot could never have gained my confidence as he did. From the outset, it was obvious that his was the most promising talent in my select class at the Freiburg Universität. His hands were slim and steady; he used the scalpel with the dexterity of a miniature-painter. No. There was nothing idiotic about Victor Rupert. But, he was a weakling and a fool. The only son of a bürger who had made a fortune in ale and bestowed on himself a Baron's coronet, from his boyhood, Victor was a coddled child; on the death of his parents he came into a considerable estate, and continued where his mother and father left off—he coddled himself. Small, dark-skinned, with huge eyes, he affected florid waistcoats and the softest boots that money could buy. His time was divided between the hofbrau barmaids, and the ladies of the chorus at the Theater Strauss. The evening invariably ended with some passing companions carrying Victor, dead drunk, to his quarters in the Freiburgstrasse, and departing with whatever money they could steal. A fool; a weakling whose brain had lost control of the flesh. I thought I could change him; I thought, in time, I could make him a useful member of the profession. I should have known better. I should have cast him back into drunken oblivion where he belonged. I should have destroyed him, before he destroyed me.

I dare not dwell upon the details of the accident; for me, every moment of remembering is agony relived. The stench of chemical gas in the laboratory, the horrified look of realization on the face of the student named Lund, the roar of the explosion and hellfire eating into my flesh, slicing across my eyes, Lund's screams slowly dwindling, and at last, merciful darkness. You may find the known facts of the case in the files of any newspaper in Freiburg; they tell me the Zeitung Leute bore the headline:

PROMINANT SURGEON BLINDED,
STUDENT KILLED,
IN UNIVERSITY BLAST

It was called a freak accident; the truth never reached the public; no one ever knew that an hour before, I had seen Rupert conducting an experiment in that laboratory; no one ever guessed that the "accident" was caused by the negligence of a fool whose mind was still fogged by the burgundy he had swilled the night before.

Rupert was terrified. Exactly how, I have never learned—possibly by bribing the orderly—he gained my bedside before the authorities had questioned me. He clutched my sleeve; abject terror whined in every breath he drew.

"Before God, Herr Doktor, I'll do whatever you ask! I'll work for you, devote my life to serving you; give you all the money I have in this world. But, I beg of you . . .!" A sob broke his words. "On my knees, I beg you, do not tell them it was I. . . ."

Anger seethed in the new, obscene darkness of my brain. My throat felt tight. I freed my arm of his quivering grasp.

"Snivelling swine!" I hissed. "Why? Tell me one reason why I should remain silent!" Laughter tore through my facial bandages. "The priceless fool! He destroys my sight; he ruins the career of a genius! And, then, he asks my protection!" The laugh shattered on a furious sob. My fingers closed over his wrist; the bones felt thin and brittle; I twisted. "Why? Tell me, Victor; Why?"

I felt his body wince; he whimpered.

"Nein, Herr Doktor! You must understand! They would imprison me! Throw me into a cell; leave me to rot! I . . . I

could not endure it; I am a sensitive man. . . ."

"Indeed!"

"Lieber Gott, have mercy, mein herr!" The clammy wrist writhed in my grip. "I promise you! Whatever I have is yours; my money, my life! You must listen to me!"

And, in the end, I did.

Do not misunderstand. I did not forgive Rupert. How can you forgive the inane court-jester who has destroyed the Castle? No, I listened to Rupert because it was to my advantage to listen. Already, I had tasted the first bitter consequences of my blindness; a voice by my bed when they thought I was still unconscious: "Well, that finishes the great Markheim. A pity. But, he was getting on in years. . . . Perhaps it is as well to go out before your talent deteriorates. . . ." This from a medical idiot unfit to be my laboratory assistant! Pity, old acquaintances uneasy in my blind fumbling presence, slow decay surrounded by mocking memories of what I once had been; that was the prospect of life should I remain in Freiburg. I had lived well; now, with only the pittance granted by the Spital Hapsburg, I should be buried alive in some dank areaway, three flights up, forgotten, alone. I knew I could not stand it; I knew I must escape. Victor Rupert offered the way out. His money would allow me to live comfortably and in seclusion; to hide the ruined tomb of genius that was my body in the solitude of the Castle von Zengerstein.

THE Baronial title of Zengerstein was no tinsel honor bought by some grubby burger suddenly grown rich. As early as 1407 the coronet was bestowed upon one General Lothar von Zengerstein of the Army of Ferdinand, by the Emperor himself; the title carried with it certain lands, some miles south of Donaueschingen, bordering the Black Forest, and dominated by an ancient, brooding Schloss; under the guiding hand of Lothar, a shrewd business man when not campaigning, the estate and the village that sprang up in the Castle's shadow, rapidly became one of the most prosperous in the Lower Schwarzwald region. There was food and comfort for all; the bauer who paid allegiance to Lothar were content. The house of Zengerstein bore sons; like their fathers, they followed the military life; Zengersteinschloss rang with the laughter of late revelry and wine. Such was the state of affairs when my grandfather, Bruno, Ninth Baron von Zengerstein, became head of the house.

Bruno was the father of two sons and a daughter, Lizavetta; Lizavetta von Zengerstein was my mother. My earliest recollections center about the mammoth halls of the Castle, where I was taken to live when my father, Paul Markheim, a medical student in Vienna, died of consumption shortly after my birth. I recall the towering figures of my grandfather and uncles grouped about the Teutonic hearth, drinking schnapps and laughing boisterously over the success of some past campaign, on the battlefield, or in the kitchen of the Inn with the new barmaid. I was in a private school in Berlin when the Franco-Prussian war broke out; vague stirrings of it reached my sheltered world. Baron Bruno and his sons were among the first to reach the front; the younger son was killed by a musket-ball that shattered his brain; Karl, the eldest, died of typhoid in an obscure village in the Midi. Baron von Zengerstein returned a broken man.

The death of his sons destroyed all hope for fulfillment of his one desire; there would never be an heir to carry on the name of Zengerstein. He was an old man, his powers wasted in a profligate youth, and now, he entombed himself in the Castle to brood away the final hours of the last of the Zengersteins. Unwholesome legends surround the last days of Bruno von Zengerstein; it is said that in his mad desire to perpetuate his line, he consorted with the powers of darkness; the shelves of his private library were cluttered with volumes of forbidden lore; more than one village girl was terrorized by the cloaked figure that roamed the region of the Castle tarn during the night hours. The bauer grew uneasy; after sundown, they clung to their hearthfires behind locked cottage-doors. One by one, families packed their belongings and moved on, away from the Schwarzwald, where, if legend does not lie, the souls of Bruno's unborn heirs bayed like

hounds to the baleful moon. The village was empty; thatched cottagerooves caved in and rats burrowed in the ruins. Zengersteinschloss fell into disrepair; the priceless tapestries decayed; cobwebs coated the stone walls; cold grates bore charred relics of sacrifices made by the Baron von Zengerstein. The peasants who found his body and buried it in the Castle crypt, say that the contorted dead face could only have been that of a madman. My mother was living, at that time, in Berlin; she did not go home for the last rites of the Baron. The strange stories frightened her; once, she expressed the desire never to see Zengerstein again; her wish was granted. When she returned to the Castle, she lay in the sightless dark of her coffin. At the age of twenty-nine, I became legal heir to the Baronial lands of Zengerstein.

My homecoming fell far short of that of which I had so often dreamed. I had thought one day to return, triumphant; I had planned again and again the restoration of the State of Zengerstein. And now, at last, I would return; but the dreams were shattered. I rode to the Castle in the coach of a reluctant driver who feared the lonely road that wound through the hamlet to the gates of Zengerstein. I returned the blind relic of a genius who spoke to none save the companion he called Victor, to pass the lingering years alone and embittered. But, at least, I thought, I would find peace in oblivion.

I WAS wrong. For nine years I pursued the mocking shadow of contentment; nine years tortured by fantasies of what heights my career might have attained but for the weakness of Victor Rupert; nine years of festering blind ambition, during which one idea came to obsess me: I must see again! Together with Victor, I made an exhaustive study of blindness; night after night he read aloud from countless ancient volumes; his voice cracked; his eyes ached; I gave him no rest. Every bypath of science and sorcery, every chance of recovery, by miracle or surgery, we explored. And, slowly, in my mind, there began to formulate a rather terrifying theory; bit by bit, fragments of medical knowledge fell into place to weave the weird pattern. It was only a theory; I told myself to be detached, weigh every possibility. There was perhaps one chance in a million that the theory would succeed in practice. Failure might mean death. But, I knew I would take that chance, if only I had the materials with which to work—the forbidden human materials. That problem was solved the night Simon Conrad came to Zengerstein.

It is not strange that Conrad lost his way. That evening a bulwark of clouds swept southward along the River Murg; fog crawled through the deserted village-lanes, and settled like a caul over the tarn outside the gates of Zengerstein. The storm unleashed furiously in the dusk. Winds keened in the catacombs beneath the Castle. Rain lashed at the casements of the library until, with a nervous gesture, Victor closed the velvet portieres. In that storm, Simon Conrad did not have a chance. At best, the roads of the district are few and obscured by the lichen-fingers of the encroaching forest. A single footpath circles Zengerstein and winds on into the flatlands that stretch toward Donaueschingen; but at a certain point in that lane, the traveler may easily go astray, and find himself lost in the byways of Zengerstein with none of whom to ask the way, no path to take but the rutted passage that climbs the hill to the gates of the Castle itself.

All day, Victor and I had been restless; never ideal companions, penned in too long by the storm, we could scarcely bear each other's presence. Victor haunted the wine-cabinet; I lost count of the times the decanter clinked against his glass. I ignored him; my mind busied itself with one thought; the possibilities of the success of my experiment. The library had been long silent, save for the whimpering of the storm.

Then, suddenly, after dark, the wolfhounds that guard the grounds of Zengerstein broke into the howl of attack. Breath hissed between Victor's lips; his light tread crossed the floor to the casement; the portieres were drawn aside. The howling grew louder.

"What is it?" I snapped. "Victor, what's the matter with those infernal beasts!"

"I can't see clearly. . . ." Rupert's voice was strained. "There seems to be a light

. . . out by the tarn. . . . A man, carrying a lantern. . . ."

"A man . . .?" I strode to his side, caught his shoulder.

"Yes . . . My shoulder . . . you're hurting me. . . . Please, there's no need to be frightened . . . The hounds will rout him. . . ."

"Call them off," I cut in sharply.

"What?" Victor whined. "But, the man may be a thief . . . a killer. . . ."

"You heard me! I want that man unharmed! Call off the dogs!"

He obeyed.

I heard his cry to the animals; the angry baying died away. Victor was still uneasy but he did not question my next command; he ran through the downfall toward the steaming tarn. He was gone some time; he must have had difficulty helping the trespasser to shelter, for, though unharmed, the man who sank into the hearth-chair was badly shaken and terrified. His breath came in sobs; in his grip, the glass of brandy Victor had given him rattled against his teeth. A full five minutes passed before he had grown calm enough to speak, or understand what was said to him.

I FLATTER myself that I handled my first interview with Simon Conrad with consummate art; the circumstances were far from favorable, but, in the minutes that had lapsed since the first baying of the hounds a cunning assurance had lain hold on my mind. Winning Conrad over was ridiculously easy. Victor told me the man's right hand had been scratched by the fangs of Prinz; under my most solicitous directions, Simon Conrad's wound was cared for; he was supplied with dry clothes, steaming coffee, and an invitation to spend the night at Zengerstein. I apologized for the necessary precaution of the dogs; with what craft I played upon his sympathies for the idiosyncracies of a blind recluse! As he sighed and sank back in his chair Simon Conrad brimmed with good-will and our best wine.

"Jawohl, Herr Doktor, this is quite an adventure I have had! Traveling alone in the Schwarzwald country is not the pastime for a timorous man, I fear . . ."

He laughed with inane good humor; I fancy my response was a trifle false. I was not in a mood for laughter. Alone! I thought. Then, he *is* alone! Excitement dried my throat. Every thread of the pattern fell so neatly into place!

I wearied of his chatter. I writhed under his gauche solicitude for my affliction.

"It must be a lonely world for you. Ja. Me, I do not know what I would do without my eyes. I am a jeweler by trade, you see; the firm of Krondorf in Munich. I have been fortunate, Gott sei dank! My sight has always been perfect. . . ."

The mask of polite interest my guest saw gave no hint of the impatience that seethed in my brain. I thought the prattling fool would never be quiet; I thought he would never retire to the bedchamber Victor had prepared for him. But, he did.

"Schlafen Sie wohl, Herr Conrad," I called after him.

"Danke. . . ."

Two sets of footsteps receded up the stone stairway. I poured myself a drink. Agitation destroyed my usually keen sense of direction; some of the wine spilled. I rose and paced before the hearth until Victor returned. I clutched his arm.

"His eyes!" I hissed. "What were they like, Victor?"

The fragile body drew away from me.

"I do not understand, Herr Doktor. What does all this solicitude for Conrad mean?" The old whine crept into his tone. "You've acted most peculiarly, ever since he appeared . . . I . . ."

"The eyes!" I snapped. "The eyes, you idiot!"

"How should I know?" Petulantly, Victor freed his arm. "His eyes are like any others . . . a young man's eyes . . . keen and very blue. I don't see . . ."

I nodded. "Then, we need wait no longer. . . ."

"Wait? I don't under . . ." The nasal voice withered; Victor swallowed audibly. "The experiment? You don't mean . . . No, you can't. . . ."

"But, we can—we shall!"

"No!" It was a weak cry of cowardice. "I won't do it. . . . It's insane. . . . Anyway, it might only fail. . . ."

"It can't fail," I said thickly. "I must see again!"

"I won't be involved in this hideous . . ."

"You will!" My fingers caught his lapel, crept upward, and closed on his throat. "You'll do as I say or spend the rest of your days rotting in prison. The authorities would still be interested to know who caused the accident at Freiburg, my dear Victor. . . ." I thrust him from me. "Think it over," I said levelly. "Think, quickly."

I heard the raw sound of his breathing. His tread approached the wine-cabinet; there was the cold clink of bottle and glass. I smiled. After a long minute, Victor said in a soft, beaten voice:

"When?"

It was not easy. I had never done this sort of thing before. I had no grievance against Conrad; but it was his life or mine. If the experiment succeeded, the world would lose an insignificant jeweler, but regain a brilliant surgeon. Yes. It was difficult. But, anyone must admit, there was no other way. We waited until Conrad slept. I do not know how long Victor crouched by my side in the tower alcove scant feet from Conrad's chamber-door. Nocturnal rats skittered and squealed in the shadows; in a lower corridor, the Swiss clock moaned the quarter hour. No sound issued from Conrad's room. With the stealth of a night animal, my hand reached for the latch.

"Quietly!" Victor whimpered. "He may still be awake. . . ."

The latch clicked faintly; the door inched inward on a crack. A hinge whined; Victor's breath clogged in his throat. We stood quite still. With the sudden changefulness of a regional storm, the rain had abated shortly before midnight; now, the moon shimmered in a liquescent sky. Victor touched my arm.

"He's asleep. . . ."

"Are you certain . . .?"

"The moonlight falling across the bed. I can see his face. . . ."

I listened more closely; the groan of a snore reached me. I nodded.

"All right," I said. "Now . . ."

It was done very quickly. We were beside the bed and Victor had pinned Conrad's arms to his sides. A gasp ripped from the sleeper's throat. He slept no longer. I

felt his neck-muscles go taut beneath my searching grasp; I sensed his bulging eyes burning into my face. He managed one desperate, *"Nein!"* and then, deftly, the scalpel in my delicate fingers found the carotid artery. Conrad jolted; his throat gurgled; warm blood bathed my hand. I heard Victor moan at the sight of it. Briefly, Conrad struggled. Then, he stopped breathing. The body went rigid, then limp. My hands quivered. It took him longer to die than I had thought it would.

The worst was over. Simon Conrad was no longer a man; only a collection of bones and flesh and dying organisms; a guinea-pig, ripe for experimentation. The laboratory that let off the library had been long in preparation for this moment; even when I had despaired of ever testing my theory,

some inner sense of urgency had led me to have every instrument in readiness. The only thing I had to fear was the weakness of Victor Rupert; and, in this final instant, that fear was dispelled. For, like an actor, nervous until the rise of curtain, but exquisitely self-assured once on stage, Victor had grown suddenly calm and detached; he was not a weakling, now. With the power of my will, the brilliance of my brain to direct his every move, he had become a precise surgical machine; his hands worked over Conrad's head as if they had been my own, responding to each order almost before it was spoken. The operation was a success; in less than an hour, two eliptical blue orbs floated in a jar of physiological saline beside the operating table.

BY DAWN, we had disposed of the body. The foetid vaults beneath the Castle were perfectly fitted to our needs. Simon Conrad Ly in final rest amid the dust of the Barons von Zengerstein. As I climbed the dank stairway to my bed-chamber, a thrill of well-being mixed with expectation shot through my weary body. My deliverance was at hand. That day, I slept a more contented sleep than I had known in many years.

Not so with Victor. The tension of that moment of strange scientific achievement past, the weakling lapsed back into the tortured realm of doubt and cowardice. He could not have slept at all; in the evening, when I rose, I found him already in the library. His voice was discordant with strained nerves. He was pouring himself a drink. I went to his side.

"How many have you had?"

"I don't see what business that is of yours!" he snapped. "If I want to drink . . ."

He got no further; I smashed the glass from his fingers. It splintered on the floor.

"I told you to stay sober!"

"But, I need it! These trembing hands —I tell you I can't go through with this . . ."

"You must! We've been over the details a thousand times. . . ."

"No. . . ."

"You will, my dear Victor. Remember the authorities in Freiburg. And one other thing; you are now an accomplice in a premeditated murder. . . ." Breath snagged in his throat; I seized his wrist. "I tell you, you *can* do it. Stop being a coward! Your hands are perfect; you worked wonderfully on Conrad last night. . . ."

"But, you were there to back me up. If I made a mistake. . . ."

"There will be no mistakes! Understand, Victor? You dare not make a mistake. You are the one who robbed me of my sight, and you are the one who will restore it!"

Despite my insistence, I was not at all certain it was wise to keep Victor from the liquor. Perhaps it would steady his nerves, work his mind to a pitch as coldly surgical as it had been when he worked on Conrad. That night, as I prepared myself for the final step in the experiment, misgiving seized my mind. Perhaps Victor was right; without my will to guide him, once I was under anaesthesia, he might falter; he might make a mistake. . . .

He stood washing his hands in disinfectant; when he spoke, his tone seemed calm enough. And yet . . . I sighed and shrugged. It was a chance, but it had to be risked. I lay back on the operating table; silent, sure, Victor was at my head. The mask brushed my cheek; the stench of ether swirled in my dark world. I breathed deeply. It did not take long. But, as I relinquished the last shred of consciousness, a needle of fear stabbed my brain. Victor's fingers touched my forehead, and, it seemed to me, they trembled. . . .

The return to consciousness was slow and painful. There was no sound; only the smell of antiseptic, and the tautness of bandages that swathed my head; the skin of my eyesockets ached and stung. My tongue felt thick in the arid hole of my mouth. Something rustled to the right of me.

"Victor . . .?"

There was no answer; instruments rattled in a sterilizing basin. I pawed the air impatiently.

"Victor, where are you?"

"Here, Herr Doktor. . . ." His voice was dry and tight. My groping fingers caught the edge of his tunic.

"Tell me," I croaked. "Quickly, you fool! It was a success? It went well . . .?"

Victor cleared his throat; his tone turned evasive. "You should be quiet, now, Herr Doktor. . . ."

I tightened my grip on his tunic; I drew his face down to mine. His whimpering breath was audible.

"Tell me!" I cried. "You haven't failed! You did not dare to fail! You succeeded! I *will* see again!"

"Yes! Yes! It's all right. I succeeded! Please . . . let me go. . . ."

I did. I sank back against the pillows. Relief and weariness flooded my body; after a time, I slept. Once, during the night, I woke, to hear the spineless sound of a man sobbing. A bottle and glass clattered, neck-to-mouth. The fool was at it again. I did not interfere. Let him drown in his sotted forgetfulness. He had served his purpose. I was finished with him.

The weeks of convalescence were not as tedious as I had feared; during those last hours of interminable night, I was sustained by taut anticipation. I scoffed at Victor's uneasiness. Time and again, he sighed at my mocking laughter.

"You must not expect too much, Herr Doktor. We can't be certain. . . ."

"Nonsense! You yourself said the operation was a success. I *shall* see! See with the young, perfect eyes of Simon Conrad!"

Victor's pessimism did not touch me. My mind was filled with plans for the resumption of my career; for the rebuilding of the life of the master surgeon, Herr Doktor Luther Markheim. I dreamed of the moment when I should watch the idiots who had supplanted me swallow their loathesome pity for a "blind has-been." My sense of security lasted until three days before the removal of the eye-bandages. Then, quite unexpectedly, a visitor came to Zengerstein.

BY HIS tread and the timbre of his voice, he was a stolid man of perhaps forty-five. He spoke calmly and with respect; his tone was cultured, though with a faint inflection of the bauer. One would not have supposed him to be connected with the police. He said his name was Koch; Inspector Koch, of the Donaueschingen constabulary. Almost imperceptibly, Victor drew a sharp breath. Only a blind man, with heightened aural sensitivity could have caught the intensity of that tiny gasp.

"Well, Herr Inspektor," I said quietly. "And, what brings the police to Zengerstein. . . .?"

"The need of information," Koch said tonelessly. "We thought perhaps you could help, mein herr. . . ."

"Gladly, but I don't see. . . ."

"Perhaps I'd best explain. . . . You see, two weeks ago, a man named Conrad, a jeweler from Munich, set out from Donaueschingen on a walking-tour of the Schwarzwald region. His wife and several friends chose to stay behind and await his return. He never came back. . . ." Koch cleared his throat.

"Victor," I put in. "Perhaps the Inspektor would care for a bit of burgundy. . . ."

"Ja. . . ." I heard Victor at the cabinet. He brought two glasses. He poured Koch's drink and began to fill my goblet.

"It is wondered," Koch continued, "if perhaps he lost his way . . . and happened onto Zengerstein. . . ."

Victor's hand jolted; wine spilled over my fingers.

"Look what you're doing, you idiot!" At that instant, I could have killed him for his treacherous cowardice. I could only cover the slip as quickly as possible, and hope that Koch had not guessed its import.

"I'm afraid, Herr Inspektor, we can be of little assistance. . . ." I shook my head, sipping burgundy. "You are the first visitor to Zengerstein in a good many years. No one could have come here without our knowledge. The dogs alone would have frightened him off. . . ."

Koch sighed. "I see. . . ."

"It is possible the poor devil lost his way in the Forest. . . ."

"Ja. . . ." The Inspector rose slowly from his chair. "Ja, that is what we fear. . . . Of course, my questioning you was only routine, mein herr. . . ."

"I quite understand." My tone was apologetic. "I should be only too happy to help, if I could. . . ."

I did not like the moment of silence that followed; I sensed the shifting of Victor's feet beside my chair, as though he cringed under a steady scrutiny. I liked it even less when Inspector Koch finally answered me in his flat voice:

"Perhaps you have already, Herr Doktor. . . ."

He left; Victor saw him to the door. Sitting alone in the library, I clutched the goblet in both hands; it splintered; needles of pain gashed my palms, and I felt a wet warmth that might have been wine—or blood. That night, in the quiet of my bedchamber, Koch's double-edged words echoed malevolently. And I knew Victor must never make another such mistake as he had made this afternoon; he and the threat of his weakling nature must be wiped out.

This time it was easier. It may be that the second time is always easier. Against Simon Conrad I had harbored no grudge. But loathing for the spineless Victor had festered within me for nearly a decade. Now, he had become downright dangerous. Once again, his sotted stupidity threatened to ruin my life. Any scruples I had had in connection with Conrad's murder were entirely lacking as I planned that of Victor Rupert. My hands were steady; my voice calm. I was completely equal to the task that lay before me.

The acquisition of the poison was not difficult; every bottle in the laboratory was so arranged that I, in my blindness, could select from memory; my presence in the laboratory or at the wine-cabinet could hardly arouse Victor's suspicion. He had drunk a good deal during the day; the bottle I set on our table at dinner must have seemed as innocent as any other; the poison did not change the color of the wine. I ate little that night; I toyed with my food and waited. Finally, it came. He was setting down his glass when it slipped from numbed fingers. A gasp tore from his lungs.

"Doktor! . . . My throat! . . . that wine . . . burning in my chest . . . I . . ."

He broke off, struggling for breath; he must have seen the quiet smile that crossed my lips.

"Nein!" Victor lurched to his feet; his chair crashed backward; china shattered from the table to the stone floor. "Nein!" It was an agonized scream, now. "A mistake . . . don't let me die . . . you can't!" His clawed fingers caught at my robe; he whimpered like a dying cur. I thrust him from me; he fell against the cabinet-de-vin; bottles and glasses clattered wildly. "You can't! You must save me. . . . I lied. . . . You vain fool, I lied. . . . Don't you see? . . . If I die . . . If . . ." The words clotted in his seared mouth; a gurgling screech dwindled in the shadowed stillnesses of Zengerstein. Rupert crumpled in a silent heap.

He was not heavy, but the descent into the crypt seemed endless. Spiderwebs brushed my face; a rat slithered across my feet and I stumbled, nearly dropping my hideous burden. The poison had worked quickly; droplets of still-warm blood oozed from Victor's scorched mouth; in the tomb itself a noisome stench choked my nostrils; without benefit of embalming, the remains of Simon Conrad had decomposed rapidly. I lay Victor on the shelf by the side of the maggot-eaten thing he had helped create. I was glad when it was over. I climbed wearily to my chamber and locked myself in. I should have been relieved; the last barrier to the safety of the new life that awaited me had been eliminated. Yet, strangely, I slept ill that night. The howling of the hounds was unbearable. They had been Victor's pets.

I thought the time would never come. The bandages itched intolerably; the waiting had done nothing for my nerves. Early this evening a fresh storm swept south along the River Murg. Demented winds chanted litanies in the depths of the Schwarzwald. I could hear the voices of men and the baying of hunting dogs, rising intermittantly above the storm. Inspector Koch and his deputies were unrelenting in their search for the man whose flesh slowly rotted in the vaults below Zengersteinschloss. I cursed Koch and his infernal curiosity. I soothed myself with the speculation that it was but a matter of hours, now; once I had removed the bandages, I could leave this damnable place, return to Freiburg and the life in which I belonged. After tonight . . .

THE laboratory seemed cold despite the fire in the grate. My hands were coated with sweat. The surgical scissors slipped several times in my trembling fingers. It *will* work, my mind chanted; it *must work!* I unwound the bandages carefully; cotton adhered to the healing flesh of my eyes. Then, the last strip of gauze fell away; an

instant of darkness and my eyelids flickered. The blackness wavered and at its heart flared a tiny dancing object—the flaming moth of the gaslamp that stood before me! Lieber Gott, I could see!

I celebrated; my triumphant laughter violated the sullen dark of the Castle. I drank too much wine and ate too heartily. I toasted the impotent ghosts of Conrad and Victor and mocked their shadows that seemed to linger in the dim corners of the library. I was delirious with joy. And why not? Life sprawled before me anew in the wonderful colors of a world I had not seen for nearly a decade. Tomorrow, I would quit this house of the dead; tomorrow, I would set out for Freiburg. And, now, in this last night of farewell, I wandered the halls of Zengerstein, drinking in sights I had thought never to know again. The candelabra glinting in errant firelight, the tapestries alive with medieval pageantry, the Gothic arches of the upper corridors, and, yes, the chamber that had been my mother's private sitting room—all before me now, just as I remembered them from childhood. Even the needlework my mother's hand had wrought remained as though she had left it there only last evening, incomplete, awaiting her return. How strange, I marvelled, that it has not altered in all these lonely years! How very strange! And, my own bedchamber, the same as ever, the canopied bed, the fencing foils and mask like skull and crossbones upon the stone wall above the mantlepiece, and the full-length mirror by the bed . . . the mirror. . . .

Perhaps it was the wine. But, as I paused before that mirror, peering into its watery crater, it seemed, for one awful instant, that I saw no reflection of myself. The glass had become a vast threshold on the lip of outer night, beyond which lay only steps going down—down to the bowels of earth, through the tombs of Zengerstein. And, as I watched, out of those catacombs rose a livid sphere of flesh, shapeless and twisted in a hideous grin. Instinctively, I drew away from that mask, and yet I could not shut from view the pallor of those flaccid jowls, the warped mouth, the hair, matted like reptiles on a scabrous skull. The dead-white skin was covered with raw cicatrices, as if some latent putrescence had seeped through the pores; and from scarred pits, sightless eyes glared at me. Breath rasped in my lungs. I reeled away from that hateful reflection, my mind screaming, No, no, it cannot be! And yet, I knew, beyond a doubt, the pale face that scowled from the glass was mine! Terror whirled in my brain; sobbing, I fell across the counterpane to sink almost immediately into a dreamless sleep—a stupor from which I woke—God knows how soon or late!—to find that blasphemous Thing of the mirror's depths bending over me!

It was not real; I lay riveted to the bed by some subconscious paralysis, and told myself it was a dream; an hallucination spawned by overwrought nerves and the macabre adventure through which I had gone in the past month. In reality, there could never exist a loathesome monster such as crowded its face close to mine in this horrible instant. Yet, even as I denied my sense of sight, a damp hand brushed my chest; fingers closed on my windpipe; the lips bared decayed teeth in a malevolent leer. The form lurched nearer and the free hand rose, very slowly. I stared, unbelieving, at the scalpel grasped in those murderous fingers. And then, I knew. This was no childhood nightmare that would wither and die in sobs of waking relief. This was inescapable truth. I knew that in the maniacal visage that bent above my bed, I was seeing *myself*, the pale killer, as my victim had seen me in his moment of final agony; viewing the horror of my soul through the eyes of Simon Conrad, the man I had murdered!

I think I screamed. I tore free of the vise-like talons and crashed blindly to the floor. I stumbled to my feet, clutching the doorway for support. And then, I ran. Aimlessly, madly, I ran, winding through the labyrinthian ways of the Castle, whimpering like the fabled child lost in the Forest. I ran until my heart pounded in my ears, my breath jolted from exhausted lungs. In the end, I cowered in some niche in the upper darkness of Zengerstein, and waited.

It did not come. I waited like a beaten animal for death, and it did not come. The Thing of the mirror gave no pursuit. Be-

hind me, the catacombs of corridor lay silent. Gradually, my sobbing quieted; my pulse slowed but remained erratic. Sweat bathed the seamed pallor of my face. Very slowly, I wound my way toward the flickering of the lamp that still burned in my bedchamber; carefully—with what fearful gentleness!—I opened the door. . . . Nothing. The room was empty. Plaintively, the storm begged entrance at the casements; outside, the hounds bayed. In the chamber itself, there was no sound save the mocking hiss of the gas lamp.

And it has been thus for the last three hours.

But, I am not fooled. I am still as clever as that Thing that lurks in the abyss of the mirror. I know the game it plays with me—a torturing game of cat-and-mouse. It has retreated, now; it would have me hope; it would have me believe it was all a dream, a trick of the imagination. I am not so stupid. There are facts you cannot escape; there are scientific reports of the last image beheld by a dying man remaining indelible in the dead eyes; the last thing Simon Conrad saw was I, the glint of the scalpel in my hand; a murderer come to claim him. So, you see why I am not fooled; you see why I am afraid. The mirror is dark, now. But, in its inscrutable well, nameless evil stirs, and would come to life—the evil of murder and insanity that claimed Simon Conrad; the pallid horror that, sooner or later, shall rise again from the depths to claim. . . .

Wait . . . the liquescence in the mirror shifts . . . the evil writhes like forming ectoplasm. . . . You see. . . . I was not wrong. . . . A rustling . . . the sounds made by the slow approach of ponderous death . . . a blur, now, in the glass . . . Yes! . . . That pale, fat face . . . nearer . . . Dear God . . . the eyes . . . the scaled blind eyes . . . and the scalpel . . . moving . . . upward . . . no . . .

I HAD come to the conclusion that the case of the disappearance of Simon Conrad was insoluble. I was wet and disgruntled; my men were glad the night was at an end. After hours of wandering the Schwarzwald region, fighting rain and treacherous marshes, we had unearthed nothing. Near dawn, the storm abated; the men returned, stoop-shouldered, to the Inn for dry clothes and warmed schnapps. For a long time, I stood irresolute on the Forest's edge, staring across the lands of Zengerstein to where the ivy-slimed Castle ramparts rose like barricades guarding some ancient secret. I hated the thought of returning to Conrad's wife and friends in Donaueschingen, unable to answer one of their anguished questions.

I am not certain what impulse took me across the village and round the steaming tarn to the gates of Zengerstein; perhaps, I merely wanted someone to talk to, and the solitary light that still burned in an upper window of the Castle seemed inviting; or, perhaps, some inner uncertainty as to the position of Herr Doktor Markheim in this singular affair still nagged me. I do not know. But, of one thing I am certain. I did not expect the horrible discovery that awaited me.

The hounds that guarded the estate were chained; I had no difficulty gaining the Castle doors. But, there was no answer to the doleful summons of the knocker. The door was not locked. I called out for Markheim; I called for that strange little companion of his named Victor. Nothing. Only solemn reverberations of my own voice. And then, I went upstairs.

The light burning in that upper room sent slices of yellow through the portal crevices. I knocked. I tried to break in. In the end, I had to summon four of my men. Even then, the door gave way reluctantly. The bedchamber was in a state of chaos. The mirror by the bed had been smashed to evilly-smiling slivers, and before it, sprawled the corpse of Luther Markheim, the slit in his throat torn wide, the scalpel still in his rigid fingers. A pool of his life-blood made a scarlet halo about the swollen white mask of his face. On the writing-table in one corner, gaslight wavered across the blood-spattered pages of the Markheim manuscript.

Herr Roderick, the coroner from Donaueschingen, is a small man with a cadaverous face and a reputation for being hardheaded and realistic; a man whose profession hovers constantly on the brink of death can hardly be otherwise. He listened

to the story of Simon Conrad; he glanced through the manuscript of Luther Markheim and made a minute examination of the body. We followed the corpse down the clammy stairway. It was extremely heavy and took four men to carry it. Gingerly, the men arranged it in the hearse alongside the liquescent decadence that was the remains of Conrad and Victor Rupert. The horses shied in the rain, as though conscious and fearful of the burden they drew slowly down the desolate hillside.

I STAYED behind; there was still the routine investigation of the estate to be gotten through for the sake of my official report. Roderick sucked his tobacco-stained teeth and followed me into the gloom of the library. He lit his pipe; a smoke cloud hovered between us, as if frozen in the chilled halflight. I sank into a chair and sat staring into the fireless grate. After a time, I sighed, and riffled the pages of the manuscript that lay in my lap.

"Strange case," I murmured. "Hideously strange. . . ."

For a moment Roderick gazed at the tiny bonfire in his pipebowl. Then, quietly, he observed: "Even stranger than you think, my dear Koch. . . ."

I looked at him askance; he went on slowly.

"Did you notice anything singular about Markheim's body, Inspektor?"

I shook my head.

"The eyes," Roderick said thoughtfully. "I examined the eyes very closely; there *is* scar-tissue about the sockets, as if an operation had been performed recently. . . . But, the eyes in Markheim's head were brown . . . and the eyes of a man who had been blind for years!"

I could only stare.

"But, Markheim could *see!* He *said* he could see. . . ."

Roderick moved his bony head from side to side.

"Not with those eyes, mein herr. Nein. Luther Markheim never saw the Castle von Zergerstein; he only thought he saw it; willed himself to see it; what Markheim saw were the reflections of his own memories. The Thing that crept from the mirror, the monster that was himself seen through the eyes of Simon Conrad, existed only in Markheim's ego-warped mind. It was an idea that pursued Markheim into the shadow-valley of madness; the guilty memory of the crime he committed. It was an idea that led him to destruction by the very hand that destroyed Conrad—the hand of Luther Markheim!"

"Still. . . ." I frowned. "The manuscript. You read it. Rupert. . . ."

"Rupert!" Roderick interrupted. "Ja. There lies the key to the puzzle, mein freund. I read the manuscript, as you say. I read of Markheim's own fear of Rupert's cowardice; he knew that Rupert was a weakling. But, he didn't guess that the weakling had a secret. A secret he was too terrified to disclose after the experiment; a secret he tried to scream out in his dying breath. The weakling, strong, as long as the will of Markheim upheld him, lost his strength as soon as that will wavered under anaesthetic. Victor Rupert began the transplantation of the eyes, but he never had the nerve to complete it!"

"Fantastic!" I rose abruptly. "My dear Roderick, you've read too much of this new fellow Freud. Why . . . it's absurd. The will isn't that powerful; it could never make a blind man believe he saw; not even a madman. . . . Don't be a fool. . . ."

The coroner did not argue. He only shrugged and smiled at me through the haze of pipesmoke. His voice was quiet.

"Perhaps we'd better have a drink. . . ."

We did; neither of us broached the matter again. After a time, he left and I began my inventory of the Castle.

I apologized to Roderick later that day. He was far from being a fool. My final investigation of the house of Zengerstein proved that. In the laboratory of Luther Markheim, on a metal stand near the operating table, I discovered a glass beaker filled with a saline solution of some sort. In the crystal-clear liquid floated two eliptical, shining orbs. The irises seemed to stare up at me, clear and keen and very blue. They were the eyes of a man who smiled in ultimate triumph.

The Girdle of Venus

BY HAROLD LAWLOR

THEY were dressing to go out the night Kenny Wilcox first heard from his wife of the incredible girdle of Venus.

He was standing in front of the chiffonier, suspenders draped over his evening trousers, shoulders bulging impressively from his white undershirt, hands wielding military

There've been a lot of theories advanced on why Venus was beautiful. One has to do with her girdle!

Heading by BORIS DOLGOV

brushes. He was cursing softly, but with feeling, as he tried futilely to flatten the waves in his curly black hair.

Baby was sitting in front of her dressing table, ignoring the shape of her actual mouth altogether while she painted on a new one, sullen and sultry and fancifully shaped, in thick, red paste.

"I bought a girdle today," Baby said, around the lipstick. It came out "I 'ought a' 'irdle," but they'd been married three months now—long enough for Kenny to know how to translate.

"You did?" he replied absently. "Why carry coals to Newcastle?"

This was a jest, and rather neat at that, he thought—containing as it did a highly complimentary allusion to the perfection of Baby's figure. But it fell quite flat, for a slight frown marred Baby's marble brow. Her eyes went to his reflection in her dressing-table mirror.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she confessed. "But anyway I bought this here girdle from a little old man who came up to me on Michigan Boulevard while I was looking in a window. I gave him ten dollars for it. Isn't it gorgeous?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Kenny caught the flash of red and green and white fire. He swore what is known as a good, round oath and dropped the military brushes. It wasn't the kind of girdle he'd thought that she'd meant. It was a narrow jeweled belt of gold mesh, heavily encrusted with sparkling gems.

It was enough to knock your eye out.

"CRY'S sake!" Kenny said. "Those stones look real."

"Well, and they are!" Baby was indignant. "I took it into Barham's later, and they said the diamonds and rubies and emeralds were genuine, just as I'd thought. You don't think I'd spend ten bucks—"

"But, look!" Kenny said. "Ten bucks! Then they're 'hot'. They've been stolen."

But this observation only made Baby very mad indeed. "So I'm a policeman, maybe? I should start asking this little guy a lot of silly questions that aren't any of my business? And anyway, he *said* the girdle was his, and he had a perfect right to sell it. So there, Smarty Pants!"

WHEN Baby reached this stage there was no sense losing your temper. Baby was beautiful, but she wasn't very bright. Except, Kenny remembered from past experience, that by following some weird logic of her own Baby usually did turn out to have been smart, after all, in a perfectly wonderful, cockeyed sort of way.

So then, remembering this, Kenny was careful to be very, very gentle. "Look, Baby," he said. "Why should this old man sell you, for ten bucks, something worth a small fortune?"

Baby sniffed. "He *explained* all that. He said the ten dollars was just a—a sort of token payment. He said he was really selling it in a spirit of mischief. And he said he'd made up his mind to sell it to the first beautiful woman who came along the avenue. Which, naturally, was me."

And thus, evidently considering this an explanation satisfactory to all hands, Baby made folds of a black evening gown and slipped it over her bright, blonde head.

But, "'A spirit of mischief'?" Kenny said thoughtfully. "Now what do you suppose he meant by that?"

Unhappily, he was to find out soon enough. But not right now. And not from Baby. And certainly not from the little old man, who was never heard from again.

"I don't know." Baby shrugged. "But that's what he said. Oh, and he did say, too, that it was the girdle of Venus."

The phrase made a melodious sound in Kenny's mind, and it conjured up romantic pictures. "The girdle of Venus," he repeated softly.

"M-h'm. You know, Venus, where they have the gondolas."

"No, no, no, for God's sake, that's Venice!" Kenny said desperately, rudely awakened from his dream. "Venus was the goddess of Love."

This impressed Baby, but not very much. "Oh. Well, so anyway. So now I have her girdle."

She hooked the jeweled belt about her narrow waist, and stood up to view with admiration the effect in her mirror.

And it was just then that a most incomprehensible thing happened.

But before we can proceed with the tale of the girdle of Venus, it were neces-

sary to shed some light on the recent history of Baby.

When Mrs. Oren P. Nicolson divorced Oren P. Nicolson, she was awarded as alimony $100,000 of his half-million-dollar fortune; whereupon Mr. Oren P. Nicolson promptly and rather giddily married Miss Baby Czwatka, the very small, very blonde personality girl behind the cigar counter in the lobby of the Nicolson Building.

Baby took him for the rest of it.

Everybody loved Baby, so everybody wished her well in her romance—with the possible exception, of course, of the former Mrs. Oren P. Nicolson. But even the very scrubwomen of the Nicolson Building showed their affection and good-will. A delegation of them, headed by a Mrs. Tillie Kopek, grinning toothlessly, presented Baby with a bouquet on the eve of her marriage. Baby was quite touched, really. She even shed a number of tears. And she warmly promised Mrs. Tillie Kopek that she would never, never forget her.

And so they were married. The marriage lasted seven months—crowded months, these, the days and nights almost turbulent with activity. Sometimes Mr. Oren P. Nicolson used to wonder how his arteries ever stood it.

And, in the end, they didn't.

On the morning of the fourteenth of August, Baby awoke to find Mr. Oren P. Nicolson dead of heart failure in the satinwood bed, twin to her own.

It was all very tragic, kind of.

Having grown fond of the generous little man, Baby was grief-stricken. But not, on the whole, inconsolably so. All in all, she reflected, widowhood might have been worse. She was young. She was a knockout in black. And she was the possessor still of a quarter-million dollars, a Kohinoor mink coat, a Lincoln Continental, and sundry jewels.

All this—less, of course, the $27.50 that she'd spend to have Oren P. Nicolson's name cut on the monument out in Evergreen Cemetery.

But that's the kind she was.

"That's the type person I am," Baby was confiding in Kenny Wilcox, a short year later. "I'm the type person that would give another person the shirt off their back. Give me a hundred dollars, say, and I'm not happy till I find some other person to give the hundred dollars *to*."

"Well, then," Kenny suggested, after but a second's thought, "give me a hundred bucks."

"I will not!" said Baby promptly, outraged. She saw the glint of mischief in his sleepy, blue eyes then, and said, "Oh, *you!* You're always kiddin' me!"

She was in love with him, by that time. He was so lean and tall and dark, his cheeks a little concave, his blue eyes lazy but holding in their depths an amused glint for the passing pageant. And she thought he was probably awfully intelligent, nearly.

"Because, look!" she pointed out to him, by way of proof, "You're a *reporter* on a *newspaper!*"

At this evidence of *her* intelligence, Kenny was almost too dazed to speak. He could only nod tolerantly, modestly.

He was saloon reporter for a daily paper, covering the night club beat. Indeed, it was while making his rounds that he'd first met Baby, in the Bami-Bami Bar. He found her vastly entertaining. After that she accompanied him always. Everything was free, and besides the places he visited were, in Baby's phrase, simply filthy with beautiful women. You tripped over them. Obviously he needed a restraining hand, and even then, even with Baby right there with him—

"Hot damn!" Kenny would say fervently, eyeing a night-club *danseuse* with burnt-orange hair, tastefully attired in three bits of silk strategically placed and a half-dozen rhinestones. "Get a load of that, will you?"

Baby would get a load of that, and start right in pitching. "Her shape isn't a bit better than mine," she'd say defensively. "It's just that you can see more of it."

Kenny was quick to admit the justice of this. "True," he'd agree, and Baby would breathe easily once more.

Thus goaded, perhaps it is not strange that it was Baby who first thought it might be a good idea if they were to get married. She caught Kenny entirely off guard, proposing to him without warning one night in The Golden Pumpkin, the while his jaw hung slackly.

"I know," she nodded, noting his aston-

ishment. "You probably think I'm crazy, wanting to marry you—"

Well, no. He wouldn't go so far as to say that.

"—me having that money and all," Baby went on, not listening to him. "But after all, money really isn't everything. And anyway, it would all stay in my name."

"Oh." Weakly.

"So you see?" Baby said. "It's settled then."

He said, as tactfully as possible, "But I'm not in love with you."

"You will be!" Baby winked, and he thought her confidence was really amazing. "Just leave it to me!"

"But I don't *want* to get married!" Harried, now.

"Never mind what you want!" Baby wagged a gay finger. "I know what's best for you!"

Naturally, he had absolutely no intention of marrying the girl. Certainly not, and God forbid! So surely, then, it's not surprising that to this day he can't quite tell you how it happened that they were married three weeks later. God knows he has tried to rationalize his madness ever since. Perhaps Baby's chatter had rocked him into a semi-comatose condition, leaving him powerless to defend himself? He doesn't really know. It's anybody's guess.

Which brings us to the night when Baby first donned the girdle of Venus and a most incomprehensible thing happened.

FOR a strange metamorphosis took place in Kenny. He discovered, suddenly, that he didn't want to go out. He didn't want to go to work. He didn't want to do a blessed thing but stay home and make love to Baby.

Surely he'd gone mad. Addled as his wits were, he still had sense enough remaining to realize how erratic his behavior was. He hadn't loved Baby when he married her, and in the three months since his feelings hadn't changed any that he knew of.

But now — now he looked at her, his eyes soft, his heart melting. She had never appeared so beautiful, so desirable. About her there quivered an aura that held the quality of light. The hell with work. He started for her, his arms outstretched, his eyes wolfishly gleaming.

Baby had hardly a moment in which to prepare herself.

"For the heaven's sake!" she said, nearly strangled as he folded her into his arms and started kissing her, putting quite a bit of steam behind it. "What brought this on?"

She was not annoyed, exactly. But he'd never behaved like this before. In the past, she always had made all the advances, and her affectionate embraces were invariably returned by him with what she privately thought was all the ardor of a defunct halibut.

Her confusion now, therefore, was surely pardonable.

She said, "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"I don't know," he answered doggedly, as if baffled himself. "All I know is, I love you. Let's not go out. Let's stay here, and—"

"Don't be silly," Baby advised, blushing a little. She pulled herself together. This was all very gratifying. It was also very puzzling. She had to have time to think. "Of course, we're going out."

He was practically putty in her hands, which was certainly a new role for him.

"Very well," he said. "We'll go out. We'll do anything you desire."

And he beamed on her.

At such dog-like devotion, her wonderment only increased. Kenny had never been like this before. She didn't know what to make of it. But she put the mink coat around her shoulders, Kenny hovering attentively the while, and they left the apartment.

They ran into trouble almost at once.

THE elevator boy, a bored stripling in mess jacket and too-tight, fawn-colored trousers, didn't look up from his comic book as they entered the elevator. Mechanically, he sent the car downward, but at the lobby floor as he pushed back the door of the cage, he raised his eyes—perhaps from habit, hoping for a tip.

It was then that he first saw Baby. He blinked once, twice. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. And a most

beatific expression slowly spread over the stripling's face.

Baby apparently didn't notice the youth. But Kenny did, and he felt a twinge of annoyance. As they left the elevator and walked through the lobby, deserted at that early hour, the elevator boy followed just a few paces behind, his eyes still glued fixedly to Baby.

Gradually Kenny became aware of this silent stalking. Ordinarily he was the most amiable of men, but his recent behavior up in the apartment had left him somewhat unstrung. While he couldn't help his earlier actions, he possessed, however, the power to wonder at them. He didn't like this dawning feeling he had that he was no longer, for some strange reason, entirely master of his own emotions.

His nerves, then, already frayed, the elevator boy's quiet stalking only served to set him the more horribly on edge.

"Beat it, kid," he advised, over his shoulder, trying to keep the irritated rasp out of his voice.

"I ain't doin' nothin'," the kid whined. "I'm just lookin' at her. I can't help it. She's—she's—"

Evidently whatever delectable vision Baby was in the boy's eyes completely beggared his powers of description.

Baby, aware at last of the youth's peculiar behavior, turned puzzled eyes to Kenny. "What on earth—?"

Kenny shrugged. His possessive grip on Baby's elbow kept hurrying her through the lobby.

"Scram, I said!" Kenny threw over his shoulder.

The boy paid no attention to him whatever. Nor to subsequent behests, growing increasingly vehement.

Kenny at last was forced to stop. He turned around. He put his spread hand over the gangling youth's face, and shoved. The boy sat down hard on his fawn-colored trousers, and an ominous ripping sound rent the air.

But there was no resentment in the boy's face at this treatment. Nothing but that calf-like, fascinated stare for Baby.

Kenny, muttering angrily, pulled Baby through the revolving door.

But his troubles were only beginning.

He stood in front of Baby, and signaled the doorman to whistle for a cab. When it had rattled to a stop at the curb, Kenny stepped aside to help Baby in.

The doorman's eyes rested on her for the first time, focused, then bulged. He followed them across the sidewalk, treading on Kenny's heels. He tried to climb into the vehicle with them.

Kenny stopped. His right fist slapped his flank in annoyance.

"Does this building hire only lunatics?" he muttered rhetorically.

Kenny wasted no time in argument. Again there was the business of the outspread hand, the ungentle shove. And the unresentful doorman was sitting there on the sidewalk, its embedded bits of mica sparkling all around him, but no more brilliantly than the gaze the enthralled doorman kept turned on Baby.

Kenny scratched his puzzled head before climbing into the cab to join Baby. He was just in time to find the cabbie sliding back the glass partition and trying to climb over into the rear seat.

By now Kenny was beginning to realize that something was definitely, radically amiss.

"For the dear God's sweet sake!" he said irritably. "What's the matter with these dopes, anyway?" And to the cabbie, "Get back there behind the wheel, you, before I kick your silly teeth in!"

Baby giggled. The cabbie ignored Kenny's shove completely. And the shove had done no good, since the barrel-shaped little man was stuck now in the partition. But he didn't seem to mind. He couldn't seem to get enough of looking at Baby.

Baby said softly, "Please get back behind the wheel. We want to go to the *Carioca Club.*"

The driver whispered, "For you, Miss, anything." And he obeyed, grinning vacuously. And even though he obeyed, Kenny noticed the driver kept looking at Baby in the rear-view mirror.

There was a most peculiar expression on Baby's face. A mixture of uncertainty, enlightenment, hope, and smug self-satisfaction. Truly it was a study in emotions.

Kenny gaped at Baby. "I'm not understanding this at all," he said peevishly.

Baby's blonde head was nodding sagely. "I think I know what the trouble is."

"Well, what's making everybody act so funny?"

"It's the girdle of Venus," Baby whispered.

"The girdle of Venus?"

"M-h'm. I guess it's made me irresistible, kind of." And when he only stared at her as if she'd gone out of her mind, she added, "Oh, Kenny, think of it! I must be nearly the goddess of Love!"

"And then again maybe you're a gondola," Kenny scoffed. Certainly she exerted some weird influence over men tonight, but her theory of her power was entirely too fantastic. He took her into his arms and chided her fondly. "Don't be a crazy little rum-dum."

But, as it developed, Baby was practically sane.

THEY still talk of that night in the *Carioca Club*.

Business was completely disrupted.

As Baby entered, one man glanced idly in her direction. His glance became riveted. Others, noting the direction of his mesmerized gaze, as well as the rather foolish expression on his face, turned to look, too.

Their glances became riveted.

Baby's self-assurance, as she strolled with Kenny at her side to a table well up-front, was amazing. She had no sooner settled herself at the table of her choice (the headwaiter was much too bemused himself to thwart her, as is the sorry habit of headwaiters) than every man in the place left his chair to come and stand in a charmed circle around her.

They made no advances. They were not offensive. They merely stood there gazing, as at a golden idol.

It was enough to give Kenny the cold shivers.

Every deserted woman in the place looked daggers at Baby. There was much sibilant hissing from behind raised hands. One woman, bolder than the rest, came to take her gallant by the ear, but he merely shrugged her off.

The musicians had long since laid their instruments aside to come and join the crowd. The adoring throng increased Kenny's nervousness. Not that anybody was looking at *him*, but basking in the spotlight of reflected glory made him feel conspicuous.

"Tell them to go away," he begged of Baby.

"Well!" said Baby, and her satisfaction was obvious. "This is really quite embarrassing, nearly." She waved her hand in a regal gesture. "You may go away now, gentlemen."

The gentlemen obediently drifted away, though with many a backward wistful glance.

"See?" said Baby to Kenny, smugly. She couldn't repress an excited giggle. This was what all women dreamed of—being irresistible to every man. It was enough to turn a wiser head than Baby's.

Kenny wiped his clammy brow. Dear God, what was happening here before his very eyes? What was this strange power Baby had acquired over men? And then he saw, out of one glazed eye, one man who hadn't obeyed Baby's imperious request. A flat-chested, pot-bellied little man, shaped like an incense burner.

This worthy came over now and slid uninvited into a chair at their table.

"Not never did I see such!" he babbled to Kenny, his eyes on Baby. "She is got sox appilling! Is like Dor't'y Lamour, only more so, evens. I can't hardly resist her myself!"

Baby fluttered her eyelashes, by way of reward for this gallant speech.

"And who are you?" Kenny asked coldly.

This seemed to wound the little man's feelings. He drew himself up, not very far, and said with *empressement*, "I am Serge Ratkov, prazzident Twentieth Century-Ratkov Studios, Hollywood, United States!"

"Well, then, go away," Kenny said sulkily. God, what an evening!

Mr. Ratkov looked at Baby. "He is in joking, maybe?"

"He certainly is!" Baby glared at Kenny. Imagine anyone being so openly rude to a movie tycoon! She turned again to the little man. "And what can I do for you, dear Mr. Ratkov?"

Mr. Ratkov tapped a pudgy forefinger on the table. "I want you should sign wit' me contreckt for ecting in pitchizz!"

He beamed. Clearly he expected Baby to

swoon. And perhaps she would have (for what woman can resist the lure of Hollywood?) had not Kenny slammed his fist on the table. This was too much.

"She doesn't want to sign any contract! She doesn't want to go to Hollywood!" he snarled. "She's married to me! She's staying right here, see?"

Mr. Ratkov ignored him, and concentrated on Baby. "Hah! You should stay here," said he, the tempter, "when you could maybe meet anyways Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power!"

Baby said, "Oh, Kenny! Errol Flynn and Tyrone Power! Think of it!"

Kenny, greatly depressed, thought of it.

Mr. Ratkov was shoving a business card into Baby's hand.

"In my office. At ten o'clock tomorrow morning," he purred. "Is signing between us contreckt."

It seemed that there was nothing they could do then but leave. Anything else would have been anticlimactical. Accordingly they made their way to the exit, though every man in the place tried to follow them out.

Baby perforce had to turn at the door, and tell them all to remain inside. They obeyed, but their reluctance was obvious.

THEY had quite a battle after they arrived home. Just between themselves. Not to be counted were the minor skirmishes on the way, when another cab driver, the doorman, the elevator boy, and several strange gentlemen from the lobby tried to follow them up to their apartment.

Kenny flattened the last of these in the corridor just outside their very door. He was breathing heavily by the time he shut and closed it behind him, and he was alone with Baby at last.

He wasted no time on diplomacy. He said flatly:

"You'll have to get rid of that damned girdle of Venus!"

"Well, and I won't, so there!"

"But don't you see?" Kenny said desperately. "It's the cause of all this trouble. It must be. You never raised all this commotion among men before."

Baby pouted. "Well, I don't call it trouble to be offered a movie contract."

"You're not really going to sign that contract tomorrow?" Kenny said, aghast.

"I certainly am! Who wouldn't?"

He paced the floor. "But I can't go to Hollywood! My work is here. What would I do in Hollywood, anyway?"

"BUT, Kenny, darling! I'll be making a fortune, probably. You needn't do anything at all."

He stopped his angry pacing and glared at her, hot-eyed. "Is that what you really think of me? That I'd be contented to be just a movie star's husband? Well, get that silly idea out of your head right now!"

"You're the one who's being silly and unreasonable, and I'm tired of arguing about it." She got up and started for the bedroom. "I'm not going to pay any attention to you."

But there was a thoughtful look on her face as she disappeared. When she'd closed the door behind her, Kenny dropped into a chair and held his head in his hands. If he could only make her see! If she went to Hollywood, it would be the end of everything between them. He'd been happy these last few months. Yes, he had! What's more —he—he *loved* Baby!

"My God!" he said aloud, in awe, when this thought struck him.

But it was true. He did.

When she came from the bedroom at last, she'd changed into a negligee. Kenny was too unhappy, and too stunned by his recent discovery that he really loved her, to notice there was an odd light in her eyes. If he'd seen it he would have worried anew. He would have wondered what she was up to now.

It was she who took up the argument where it had left off.

"I don't see why you care what I do, anyway," she said. And again he was too preoccupied with his own throughts to notice the covert, almost sly, look she threw his way. "You'll be glad to get rid of me. You never loved me. You didn't want to marry me in the first place. I practically forced you into it. So I'm signing that contract, and you'll be free."

Her mind was made up. He could see that.

So he only said wearily, "All right. But

remember this. I love you now. And I always will."

She stood there, staring at him open-mouthed. Evidently she couldn't say a word. She just turned quietly and went back into the bedroom.

Kenny sighed and followed her discouragedly.

It all came back to that girdle of Venus. If she didn't have it to wear in the morning, Serge Ratkov would wonder what he'd ever seen in her the night before. She wouldn't be able to repeat the sensation she'd already created. Serge would think last night's reaction by the men in the *Carioca Club* a put-up job. A gag.

If Baby didn't have the girdle!

Kenny started out of bed, then thought better of it. It was too late to dispose of it now. He'd wait until morning. He was always up before Baby. He'd get the girdle of Venus and sell it for what it was worth.

In a way, he thought guiltily, it would be a dirty trick. But all was fair in love and war. The loss of the girdle would nearly kill her. She might even hate him for it at first. But he'd make it up to her somehow! He'd love her so much she'd never miss it!

He smiled in the dark, and the weight lifted from his heart. And he fell into a deep, untroubled sleep.

BUT in the morning, when he awakened, Baby was gone.

He couldn't believe it at first. He didn't believe it really until he went to her jewel case and found that the girdle of Venus was gone, too.

He was too late.

What hurt him most—she hadn't even left a note. She'd gone without even saying good-bye. Quite as if she'd never loved him. Not that he blamed her. It was his own fault, really. Love couldn't feed on thin air. His indifference these past few months must have killed whatever love she'd felt for him.

He cursed himself abjectly, and wandered around the empty apartment like a lost soul that day. He'd never dreamed that Baby's absence could make such a difference. He'd never dreamed he'd cared for her so deeply, or that life could be so empty now.

Late that afternoon he was sitting moodily in the gloaming in front of the dying fire when he heard a slight sound behind him.

Baby.

At first he thought she was a materialization evoked from thin air by his thoughts of her. But she was real enough.

He sprang to his feet incredulously. "Baby! You've come back!"

She was in his arms, he was holding her tight, he was raining kisses upon her.

And she was whispering happily through a throat thick with tears. "It's true! You love me. And for myself, not just because I'm wearing the girdle of Venus. I had to find out, for sure. Last night when you told me you loved me—*I wasn't wearing it!* I'd left it in the bedroom!"

"But—but where is it now?"

"Does it matter?"

It didn't.

Kenny held her closer. "And the contract?"

"Oh, who *cares* about Hollywood!" A dreamy light appeared in Baby's eyes. "After all, money really isn't everything, just like I always said. And anyway," she frowned slightly, "that Ratkov had the nerve to offer me only a hundred dollars a week to start!"

BABY flatly refused to tell Kenny what had become of the girdle of Venus. The girdle that true love had made her discard. And perhaps he never would have found out. But one night he came home very late. He'd stood in line for hours to see the sensationally successful Gloria Gayle in the sensationally successful picture, "Hearts Asunder."

He'd sat through the picture three times, with the rest of the all-male audience, unable to tear himself away.

He'd left only when the theater had closed for the night.

All this he confessed to Baby. And now, as he sat dreamily on the edge of the bed, lackadaisically removing his socks, he sighed, "That Gloria Gayle! She's terrific! You ought to see her! Every man among us sat there drooling."

He looked across at Baby, sitting on her vanity bench, her chin in her hands, a mischievous smile in her eyes as she fondly regarded him

"Oh, you can smile," he said. "But she's terrific, I tell you! I wonder where they ever found her?"

Baby giggled. "Kenny, darling?"

"Um?"

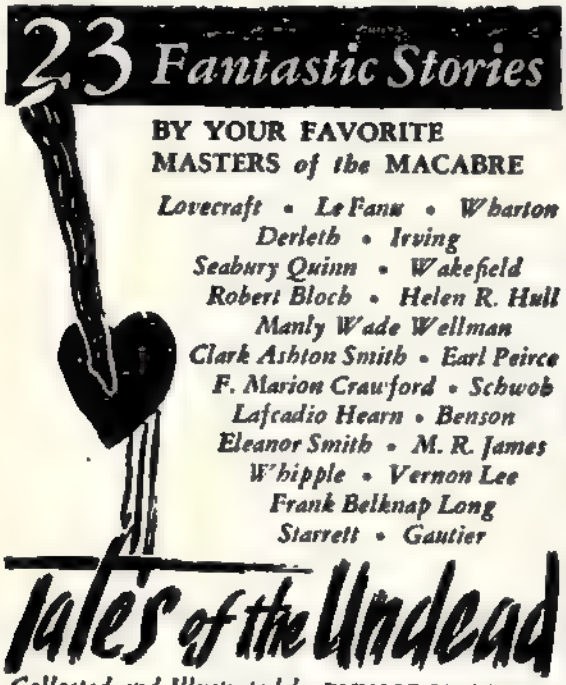
"Do you still love *me?*"

The rapt look left his eyes and they softened as they always did when he looked at Baby—Baby who'd sacrificed everything for him.

"Of course, I love you! Don't be nuts!" With which romantic speech he grabbed her, and did a few things expertly in his own inimitable way to prove it to her satisfaction.

Evidently it did.

For when she could get her breath again, she said demurely, "Then I'll tell you who Gloria Gayle is. They say her real name is Tillie Kopek. And they say she used to be a scrubwoman in the Nicolson Building." Baby dimpled at his expression. "But, of course," she added mischievously, "that may be just the idle chatter of a lot of jealous women!"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Everyone is aware of the price rises in our economy; correspondingly the cost of putting together and producing your WEIRD TALES has soared in the last few years.

For as long as possible the publisher absorbed these increased charges himself, but now that is no longer feasible. Some of the higher costs must be passed along in part if we are to produce WEIRD TALES on its accustomed plane of excellence.

For our part, although we regret the change, we are at the same time pleased. For we will be able to continue our policy of obtaining the best available stories, bringing them to you in the kind of WEIRD TALES you want.

Silver Anniversary

WITH the March, 1948, issue, WEIRD TALES celebrates a quarter-century of publishing the best obtainable stories in the fantasy genre.

Yes, three numbers from this one you have in your hands, WEIRD TALES will be twenty-five years old. We can't help looking back with considerable pride over those years. The fine and prominent authors who have appeared in these pages are too numerous to mention; the number of WEIRD TALES stories honored by use in anthologies and collections of "Bests" is legion, comparing more than favorably with any other magazine, pulp, slick or quality.

The WEIRD TALES tradition is something which has grown through time, grown by trial and error, by hard work and by careful attention to the desires of the majority of our readers, and by equally careful attention to the wants of other less vociferous groups with special likes and dislikes.

We are in debt to many people, people like the writers and illustrators who have helped us carry out your ideas and our ideas in the magazine. We are in debt to Edwin Baird and Farnsworth Wright, two former editors of WEIRD TALES, whose skill and belief in the magazine's ultimate destiny contributed so much to the stature WEIRD eventually assumed.

Then, of course, there are the readers whose views and opinions, nearly always generously expressed, have helped guide our judgment through these two and a half decades.

We have been working hard to make the March, 1948, number of WEIRD TALES one which you will remember; make it a fitting anniversary issue.

There will be just as many WEIRD TALES' all-time top-notch favorite contrib-

utors as we can cram-pack between the covers. We are going to have some poetry which will very pleasantly surprise you; we've warned artists Lee Brown Coye, Boris Dolgov and other of your favorites to get ready to work overtime. We expect the cover will be something extra special. We've thought about it so long around here that we have—figuratively speaking at least—several dabs of paint on our nose where we've kept sticking it in front of the artist's canvas.

What emerges January First next—publication date for the March, 1948, issue—should be a WEIRD TALES you and we will be very proud of, a silver anniversary present from us to you.

READERS' VOTE

THE DAMP MAN RETURNS	THE HOUSE OF CARDS ENNA
MRS. PELLINGTON ASSISTS	THE OCCUPANT OF THE CRYPT
QUEST OF THE GAZOLBA	THE GIRDLE OF VENUS

THE PALE CRIMINAL

Here's a list of eight stories in this issue. Won't you let us know which three you consider the best? Just place the numbers 1, 2, and 3 respectively against your three favorite tales—then clip it out and send it to us.

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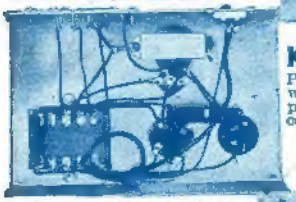

KIT 4 You get parts to build this Vacuum Tube Power Pack; make changes which give you experience with packs of many kinds; learn to correct power pack troubles.

KIT 5 Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.

KIT 6 You build this Superheterodyne Receiver which brings in local and distant stations—and gives you more experience to help you win success in Radio.

My Course Includes Training in

TELEVISION • ELECTRONICS

FREQUENCY MODULATION

Do you want a good-pay job in the fast-growing Radio Industry—or your own Radio Shop? Mail the Coupon for a Sample Lesson and my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in RADIO—Television, Electronics," both FREE. See how I will train you at home—how you get practical Radio experience building, testing Radio circuits with BIG KITS OF PARTS I send!

Many Beginners Soon Make Extra Money In Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll I start sending EXTRA MONEY JOB SHEETS that show you how to make EXTRA money fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time while still learning! It's probably easier to get started now than ever before, because the Radio Repair Business is booming. Trained Radio Technicians also find profitable opportunities in Police, Aviation, Marine Radio, Broadcasting, Radio Manufacturing, Public Address work. Think of even *greater* opportunities as Television, FM, and Electronic devices become available to the public! Send for FREE books now!

Find Out What NRI Can Do For You

Mail Coupon for Sample Lesson and my FREE 64-page book. Read the details about my Course; letters from men I trained; see how quickly, easily you can get started. No obligation! Just MAIL COUPON NOW in envelope or paste on penny postal. **J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7HM, National Radio Institute,** *Pioneer Home Study Radio School,* **Washington 9, D. C.**

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